

El Toro

J. V. Anthoine

It is perhaps as well to clear up a few points concerning the actual peak itself before describing events on the expedition. In 1957 Egger and Jungmeier completed the first ascent of Yerupaja Chico, 6121 m, from the Amazon side (east). This was written up as Yerupaja Chico, or El Toro; it received its second ascent in 1969 by Messner—also from the Amazon side but by a different route. The peak attempted by the United Newspapers Andean Expedition 1970 lies between Yerupaja and Yerupaja Chico and is the un-named peak in David Adcock's article on the New Zealand Expedition to Yerupaja in 1968 (*A.J.* 74 7). Senor Morales Arnao, the Peruvian Head of Andeanism, agreed that Yerupaja Chico was not the same peak as El Toro and that El Toro was the unclimbed peak to be attempted.

The objectives of the expedition were the West faces of El Toro and Rondoy. Rondoy had been climbed from the north-east by the 1963 L.S.E. Expedition (Bonatti and Oggioni having failed narrowly in 1961). Due to delays resulting from the earthquake and difficulties encountered on El Toro, the attempt on Rondoy was called off because of insufficient time.

From the Base Camp at 4000 m a quick reconnaissance had led the members to think that they would be up El Toro in about ten days.

When a fortnight had gone by and they had only reached the foot of the final 2500 ft face the members realised that, yet again, they had underestimated their hill. Below lay a 1500-ft ice-slope that had needed fixing for its whole length, two miles of glacier and nearly 3000 ft of moraine. The ice-slope was a last resort, as it bounded an easy-angled slope of séracs described by Cassin as containing 'the biggest crevasses ever seen by him including those in the Karakoram and Alaska'. Cassin found a bridge—we did not.

The face above looked quite reasonable and Brown and Barker decided to do about half of it in a day and then have a go for the top. They managed the overhanging schrund and 600 ft of ice. The following day Alcock and Homer climbed 600 ft above the previous high point. All this was reasonably straightforward, except that often the ice was only a couple of inches thick and required delicate handling. The third day on the face saw Barker, Brown, Alcock and Kemp on continually steep ice crossing what was later called the Cresta Run to reach the Big Schrund. The lip of the schrund was first reached by Brown, who started babbling to the others about its size. The slot itself was only a few feet across, but the space inside could have accommodated the Albert Hall.

It needed little imagination to realise that the hanging slope above needed

50 *The party on El
Toro. l to r:*
Brown, Anthoine,
Homer, Hunt,
Corner, Barker,
Alcock. This and
next three photos:
D. Kemp

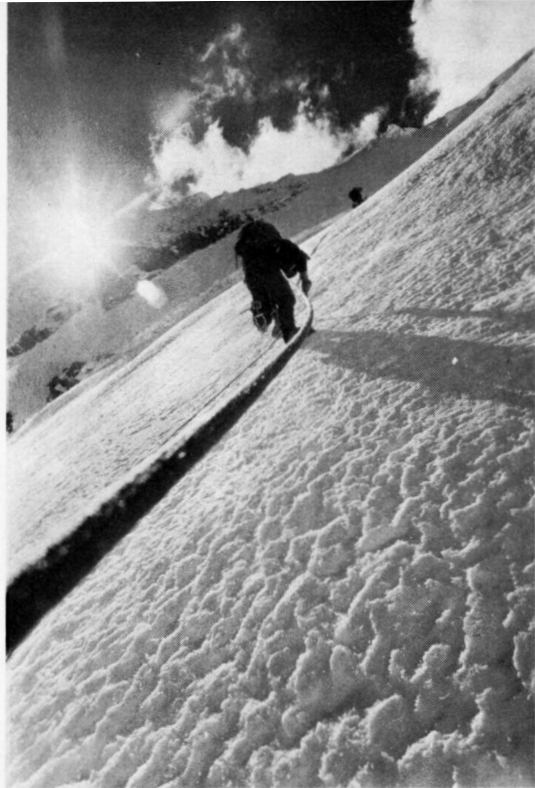


only a slight tremor to set it in motion. Barker led across the schrund and up the ice above for 400 ft to the next schrund which providently was jammed with snow. The time was mid-day and the face suddenly became most active, with rock and ice bouncing down its entire length. The four decided to stay in the schrund under the shelter of its upper lip until the evening freeze started. After five hours Barker was beaten by boredom, and started down—the others followed. Viewed from Camp 2 below the face, the descent had the appearance of a controlled fall. Initially the four stuck to the rule of only one on each section of fixed rope at a time. When they reached the Cresta Run a race ensued. At times there were three climbers descending one rope simultaneously at high speed; when they reached camp the others soon found out why. The Cresta Run was over a foot deep in moving snow and ice and from there to the foot of the face they were bombarded with stones and lumps of ice. All thought it the most harrowing experience they had ever had.

The slope was now fixed to within 700 ft of the ridge, and the next day Anthoine and Homer set out to bivouac in the top schrund. Homer was sick and returned to camp, Anthoine continued to the upper 'Bedroom' schrund and began a twenty-hour wait for the others. At 3 o'clock in the morning the rest of the team started up the face. At 8 o'clock Barker and Kemp arrived at the 'Bedroom', the other four had all returned to Camp 2 with bad stomachs.



51 *El Toro—the route*



52 *The slopes below Camp 2*

Barker and Anthoine left Kemp at the schrund and climbed 400 ft of ever-steepening ice-flutings to beneath the final 300 ft wall. It looked extremely impressive and would definitely need fixed ropes, as much of the climbing would involve traverses beneath the enormous cornices and séracs of the ridge. They retreated to Camp 2 in worsening weather and together with the others descended to Base Camp for food and more equipment.

After three days of bad weather Alcock, Anthoine, Barker and Brown returned to the face. The fixed ropes were under about 4 inches of ice and had to be chopped free before height could be gained. The 'Bedroom' schrund was reached in the afternoon when the daily bombardment was at its peak. Dawn saw Brown tackling the ice above the previous high point. After half an hour he was back at the stance, having climbed about 100 ft of 75° ice. Barker took over and ran out 300 ft over very impressive ice with a rope move in the last 50 ft. The stance was a slot in a vertical ice-wall only 30 ft from the ridge. Barker climbed the wall to the ridge after bringing Anthoine up. The latter proceeded to explore the belay slot and eventually emerged on the Amazon side of the ridge, having avoided the wall. The altimeter read 5880 m, and the summit was, at the most, 150 vertical feet above. Between the climbers and the peak lay a slight downwards slope to a col about 100 ft away; then an easy-angled rope's length to the top. Brown and Alcock joined the others, to



53 *El Toro—the upper slopes; climbers arrowed*
A—Albert Hall Schrund
B—Bedroom Schrund

find glum faces. Despite easy looking ground in front, any attempt to continue proved highly dangerous, with chest-deep snow avalanching at a touch. All four decided that to go on would be unjustifiable, and at 10am they started down, stripping the fixed ropes as they went.

They were joined at Camp 2 by Hunt and Kemp, who had just completed the first ascent of Tam Norte, a 5480 m peak nearby. Corner, the reporter, had been with them to within 400 ft of the summit, where he was wisely 'pegged out' to await their return.

The rest of the descent was carried out Brown-style; this meant one huge rucksack each, and was instrumental in Alcock doing a flying act down one of the fixed ropes before shedding his entire load into an apparently bottomless crevasse.

In retrospect, all agreed that the climbing was more 'nervous' than 'physical', due to a combination of factors. Apart from the constant threat of being wiped off the face by an avalanche, the gradually increasing difficulty all the way up took its toll on nervous energy, and afterwards Brown remarked 'It was the most consistently hard thing I've ever been on, you couldn't relax for even one pitch'. Perhaps, if the difficulty had continued for the last few feet to the summit, they might have made it, but discretion proved the better part of valour—or did it?

MEMBERS J. Brown (leader), A. Hunt, D. Alcock, G. Homer, W. Barker, Mo Anthoine (deputy leader), D. Kemp (photographer) and M. Corner (reporter).