

Ski descent of Mont Blanc

D. St. J. Brightman

At 5.30am on 9 June 1971 I looked out of the window and could see, for the first time in three weeks, the summit of Mont Blanc. I quickly collected my gear and ran down the stairs out into the main street of Chamonix where I found Sylvain and Guido already strapping their skis to the top of the car. It looked as though another descent of the North face of Mont Blanc was about to take place. After five weeks of training on the upper ski slopes of the Grands Montets, and a first direct descent of the Dôme du Goûter (4304 m), we felt ready to do the North face itself.

Four years previously, whilst trekking on skis on the glacier des Bossons, we first saw the North face at close quarters and subconsciously surveyed a possible route down. However, on that occasion we only reached the refuge Vallot at 4362 m due to strong winds and excessively cold conditions, which caused frost-bite on my fingers. We had to return, but we had seen the North face and the temptation to ski down it did not fade over the years. During training, the plane landing us on the Col du Dôme had circled the summit of Mont Blanc, and so we had the opportunity of deciding on a definite route. All we had to do now was get to the top.

The original idea was to take an aeroplane from Le Fayet to the Col du Dôme and climb from there to the summit, using crampons on our ski boots, but we found that Air-Alp could not lay on an aeroplane. By good chance a friend in the construction business had a helicopter working in the vicinity of Chamonix, and the pilot was only too glad to drop his bucket of cement and see if the helicopter could reach the summit of Mont Blanc.

My companions were Sylvain Saudan, who in 1970 skied down the North-west face of the Eiger, and is known on the continent as the 'Skier of the Impossible', and Guido Vignolo, an Italian skier and alpinist who, during the descent of the Dôme du Goûter, had shown that his presence would be an asset on the North face, so I felt that I was in very good company as we headed towards the helicopter take-off point. The fourth member of the party was François Charlet (French Press). He was to be dropped on the Col du Dôme with a cine camera.

On arrival at the helicopter port—a patch of grass at the roadside—we strapped our skis to the outside of the helicopter whilst taking the rucksacks and camera in with us. Within seconds we were airborne, circling higher and higher over Chamonix, coming into view of the Dru, the Mer de Glace, the Vallée Blanche. Looking down we could see the sharp needles of the aiguilles, the essence of Chamonix. We were soon approaching the Aiguille du Midi at 3842 m. The time was 6.30am. The weather looked fantastic. Miles away we could see the top of the Matterhorn emerging out of the clouds, and in the west, white rolling

clouds over Geneva. The helicopter headed towards the Vallot hut above the Col du Dôme and the entire Italian panorama came into view. Gently the pilot put the machine down at the refuge Vallot and off-loaded François and his camera. With the loss of François's weight the helicopter seemed to bound into the air and suddenly we were approaching the summit of Mont Blanc on the Italian side. The south side looked precipitous and terrifying; I thought 'if this is the South face, what of the North?'.

The helicopter came in to land, but the wind was behind us and we went in too fast. Quickly our pilot pulled us up and we circled to come in on a facing wind, slowly descending. When we were 5 ft from the summit we landed. Quickly we off-loaded the rucksacks and skis and said 'good-bye' and 'thanks' to the pilot. The helicopter disappeared into the morning air. The time was 7.10am. We stood silently on the top, looking out over all Europe.

Checking equipment and photography took up the next half hour, and then we had breakfast of cheese and bread, and some coffee which the thoughtful Guido had risen so early to make. We were on top of the world, all enjoying just being out in the mountains in such beautiful weather and with such breath-taking views; with the sights of Mont Blanc all round us, we were unaware of the fast changing conditions.

Suddenly the clouds that were earlier gently rolling over Geneva had crept round the south side of Mont Blanc and the first we saw of them were wisps of mist coming over the col. I moved up to the summit to get a better position and was horrified to see a build up of cloud heading our way. Quietly I called the others over and we decided that if we were to do the descent we would have to leave now. We jumped on to our skis and looked down to see if we could still see François with his camera, but he had disappeared into the swirling cloud.

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The time is 8.15am and with a last look round we plunge off on to the North face. The snow is fantastic—6 in. of powder snow on a hard base. Sylvain leads and seems to find the best snow I have seen all year. 'Turn, turn, turn, will he never stop?' The air up here is very thin, but after a while Sylvain stops and I get a chance to take in some much needed air. The angle is, in my estimation, about 45° and I am managing splendidly. We have a talk about the snow conditions and the chances of avalanche, but the snow is good and there is no danger yet. The sky is no longer blue but grey, and the visibility has changed; wisps of mist from the col whip across the face below us.

Looking up I can see the soles of Guido's skis, he looks quite unconcerned and is busy with his camera. Sylvain is testing the snow and poking at it with his ski stick. I wonder if it will get steeper. We move off again and stop, the texture of the snow has changed visibility and is creating white-out conditions where you can't see the ups from the downs. I console myself with the thought that on the North face we only have downs. On we go moving down, sure but quite quickly until we come to a crevasse which we knew we would have to cross. Above it is ice but there is a snow bridge running from high right to low left.

The problem is the steepness at 50°. Sylvain takes it first, then Guido. I watch them very carefully. I see what they make of it. In a flash they are both across but I am still on this side. I have been standing on the same spot too long and with very shaky knees side slip down towards the crevasse and the snow bridge. The sound of ice under my skis fills my head with noise. I hit the snow bridge too fast and with much effort regain my balance, shoot forward and downward until I safely join Sylvain and Guido on the other side. We are half-way down the steep side of the North face, the time is 9.30. Slight anticlimax after the crevasse. For three weeks or more we had discussed it, and it had grown out of all proportion in my mind, but we did expect to spend some time getting across, and there we all were safely across in no time. However, we have a long way to go and, I expect, quite a few surprises between here and Chamonix. Before these thoughts are out of my mind the cloud gets thicker, and visibility cuts down even more. We have some difficulty with the direction of route, but Sylvain has a nose for it, and leads us down and down.

Sylvain and Guido have stopped below and are looking up. I set off to join them.

On arrival Sylvain tells me to bring my ski-stick into action quicker, thus making the turns more fluent. I think 'What a place for a ski lesson!' but he is right, and I progress down with more ease. Like a ceiling, the cloud is above us and the whole panorama of the Grand Plateau and the glacier des Bossons suddenly bursts into view. We see the Chamonix valley and our route laid out before us. But where is François? By now he should be in position to photograph us on the last stage of the steep North face. We search the snow below with our eyes, looking for a black spot that would be François, but no black spot. Our eyes travel up towards the col which is now high up to our left, but all we can see is the whirling clouds and all we can hear is the sound of the wind—no François.

With the added burden about the worry of the loss of François, we have to negotiate the steep ramp between a rock face on one side and crevasses on the other, leaving very little room for movement and no room for error. This we manage by attacking it forcibly. One after the other with lots of very short turns, we descend the ramp and flash down the last steep slope to the Grand Plateau. We have succeeded in our attempt.

But we still have a long way to go as the conventional route down from the Col du Dôme has many hazards. We must still be on guard for the unexpected. We stop at the pick-up point where it was arranged for the helicopter to take François and the film back to Chamonix. Soon we see it coming up the glacier. The time is now 10.45. Still no sign of François. We are very tired with the physical effort of the descent and in no condition to re-climb the mountain. So we wait for the helicopter to land and inform the pilot of what has happened. The weather is getting worse and the snow is not far away. However, the pilot says he will try to go up as far as he can to see if there is any sign. We watch him climb up but, on reaching the thick black cloud which has chased us down, the helicopter turns and flies off to Chamonix alerting the Mountain Rescue. We

continue down to the Grands Mulets hut where we stop to inform the guardian and to have a cup of tea. We set off again. The snow is still in good condition, but further down it has melted and left many crevasses exposed. Snow-bridges which we had crossed a few weeks earlier were no longer there. We find a new way and traverse under the rock face of the Aiguille du Midi, until we reach the Met. station. We return to Chamonix by the cable car as there is no more snow to ski on. The time is 2.00pm.

NOTE: François arrived back in Chamonix three days after setting out, fit and well but very tired. He had a story to tell, but it was not our story!

Specialists on the Eiger

Epicures on the Lauper route

B. W. J. Griffiths

Early in January 1971 Captain Nigel Gifford, A.C.C. revealed his private desire to tackle the Eiger. I matched his ambition and the casual spark which kindles so many adventures began to glow. After talking round the subject we came to a 'I'll climb it if you'll organise it' agreement and 'Eiger 71' was on. We chose to attempt the Lauper route,¹ described as a masterpiece of traditional climbing.

'Eiger 71' is the 'Mod Tag' we tied to our more formally known, A.C.C. Alpine Expedition 1971. The fact that the Army Catering Corps had personnel interested in climbing, let alone demanding mountains, seemed to engender a lot of interest; it may even be rousing similar emotions now. We, on the other hand, found it quite normal.

Nigel needed a strong companion for this route, to compliment his own energetic and advanced climbing ability. This was to be a Marine Commando called Martin Chambers, a stringy, lolloping climber of high grade rock ability. He had experience of snow conditions gained during Norwegian winters and being a Marine Commando there was no doubting his strength and fitness. He had two further qualities we liked. He was too gentlemanly to turn down our invitation and he had an intense interest in expedition catering.

¹ The Lauper route was that taken by Hans Lauper and Alfred Zürcher with Alexander Graven and Josef Knubel when making the first ascent of the North-east face of the Eiger on 20 August 1932 (See *A.J.* 44 318 and 45 53).