

Albigna Valley—1978

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As the weather in London and in Switzerland was not good during the month of July we did not expect very good climbing conditions for our August Alpine holiday. One can do various training exercises at home in order to be fit; I did so again by riding my bicycle regularly round Hampstead Heath but so far nobody can do anything about 'training' the weather.

My wife and I joined the ABM SAC Meet in Zermatt and against our expectations we had marvellous weather for the first 3 days. I made good use of it by walking up Gorner Grat the first day, to the Schwarz See on the second, and on the third day to the Rothornhut with the intention of walking up to the Wellenkuppe the following day. The result was that I arrived totally exhausted at the hut after the 1500m ascent from Zermatt only to realize during the early hours of the morning, when wakened by the raging storm outside, which brought with it rain and snow, that any climbing would be impossible for some time.

We tried to dodge the rain on the way down from the hut, found the path frequently snowed over and attempted partly to glissade down the snow slopes. I had the awful experience of suddenly hitting some hard rock hidden under the snow and shooting forward, sliding head first down the wet snow and losing my ice-axe during the fall. It was frightening until I managed, after about 200ft of quick descent, to reverse my head down position and to break my fall by braking with all my fingers in the snow, before reaching the rocks below. A couple of days later the rain stopped and we had some very enjoyable walks. One of these walks took about a dozen of us to the Bétemps Hut, where we saw tame marmots sitting on their hindlegs begging for food like dogs.

The storm caused a lot of damage to the areas S of the Alps and put many climbers in danger. At one time 18 people had to take refuge in the otherwise empty Solvay Hut and one climber, Herr Jean Juge of Geneva, the President of the International Mountain Rescue Committee, was a victim of the severe conditions high up on the Matterhorn. Juge managed, at the age of 70 years, to climb the N face with 2 guides and reached the summit after an emergency bivouac but he was not able to reach the Solvay Hut the next morning and had to be left again in the emergency bivouac. When the guides managed to reach the spot on the second morning they found that he had not survived the night. Frank Solari and John Whyte observed the rescue operation the following night when 2 helicopters brought the body down, one using a flood-light the other lowering a rescuer. 'De mortuis nil nisi bene', but I heard a Swiss remarking 'At 70 years one ought not to attempt climbs like the N face of the Matterhorn, more especially when the weather forecast was not good'.

I took some photos of the mountain as soon as the weather cleared. The Matterhorn was absolutely white or should I say pink and completely covered with snow right down to the Hornli.

Soon I was able to hear that Stuart Ferguson had arrived in the Engadine and was waiting to climb with me again. We said farewell to our friends in Zermatt and travelled to St Moritz.

On 12 August I walked with Stuart to the Segantini Hut and the next day we did Piz Languard in brilliant sunshine. We had left Pontresina rather late and were the



90 Bregaglia pinnacles (*This and next photo: W. Kirstein*)



91 Abseil from Gallo

last people to arrive on the summit. I have seen the extensive views from there many times but never as wonderful as on this occasion. The following morning Stuart took me from Plaun da Lej on the Silser Lake across the Grevasalva Col to the Julier Col. Although I have been going to the Engadine for more than 50 years I had been that route only once before and that was on skis some 49 years ago. This time we met only 2 people coming in the opposite direction.

The time had come to try something more adventurous and the 'mountain-eering centrum' in Pontresina suggested the Gallo in the Albigna Valley. We had to wait a few days until a guide was free and we could only hope the good weather would continue. It rained the next day all over Switzerland but by Thursday we could hardly believe our eyes when we read the weather report announcing fine weather throughout Europe for Friday. Thankfully the report was right and at 6am with our guide, Oscar Kleger, Stuart and I set off for Maloja and down the Maloja Pass to Pranzaira in the Bregaglia, the valley station of the cablecar going up to the Albigna Lake. We went up at 7am on the first cable-car and arrived at the lake 30 min later. The rather cool and fresh wind in the valley had stopped, the day looked as glorious as the weather report had promised.

A very narrow but safe path on the W side of the lake led us in about 2½ hours to the small glacier 'Vadretschin'; the snow was good to walk on, crevasses were not to be seen and did not seem to exist. Half-way up the glacier we turned right towards the start of the climb and whilst scrambling up we saw and heard a huge stone-fall

on the other side of the Albigna Lake, in the area of the Punta d'Albigna about 2½ miles away. We knew of at least one party climbing there, a young guide and his tourist had been in our cable-car in the morning. I think it was good for our state of mind that we learnt only much later in the afternoon of the tragic accident.

For our climb we had been told that the first pitch of the normal route was the hardest one. In fact I heard afterwards that some parties had used a shoulder as a stance to get up this first steep slab. I was reminded of the one slab on the Piz Balzetto 2 years ago, which I had not been able to climb. I had found a way round it and had been received by the guide, waiting above the slab for me, with the words 'Well here you are but that is not the climb' (*AJ* 82 197). Now at the Gallo there was no such chance of avoiding the difficulty. Somehow I scrambled up still wondering how Oscar had done it without the help of a rope. Stuart followed using gloves which would have made it quite impossible for me to get any hold on this smooth slab. The following pitches were steep but easier than the first one. The route followed a kind of trench in the rocks, just leaving room for putting boots into it. I preferred to climb out of the trench to the left, where I saw more stances and holds. However, soon I had to return to the proper route which now got very steep again. The holds there were very small, one had to use them to pull oneself up and I regretted now that I had stopped my daily chin-ups for some time on account of a 'tennis shoulder'. I missed the strength of those muscles very much. After about a further hour of this kind of climbing we arrived at the foot of the summit slab. I can only say it looked rather terrifying to me. At least 15ft high, about 45°, as smooth as a smoothing-iron on the climbing surface and absolutely vertical on the other 3 sides. It was clear that one had to climb the 45° slab to reach the 1ft by 3ft summit plateau, on which Oscar was sitting astride, not in the least troubled by the exposure.

I managed to get up in the end keeping to the right, where my fingers could grip over the edge on my right. I cannot say that I felt very happy up there, it was the smallest summit I have ever been on. I had not realized we would not climb down the way we had come up. Looking down on the left of the upward route I knew we would have to abseil but I could not see where we would stop. Stuart, who had come up after me, had to abseil first and I thought if he can do it I shall be able to do it as well. It did not occur to me that about half-way down the first abseil there was a gap in the face. I really was not prepared for this and suddenly I started turning round, realizing there was no rock-face anymore to put my boots against. This was my first free abseil and I have to admit I was very glad when I felt firm rock under my feet again.

There was still another abseil down to the gap between Gallo and Cacciabella. From there we could look down into the Bregaglia and Soglio was about 2000m below us. There in the gap we took the rope off and scrambled down to the glacier in about 15 min.

The weather held and the walk down to the lake was wonderful or would have been so had we not seen a helicopter landing at the Albigna Hut. We were certain now that an accident had happened but the full story we heard only when we reached the lake and Stuart saw the young guide who had come up with us in the morning. This guide had done a ridge climb with his tourist and was nearly at the summit of the Punta d'Albigna when he heard a stone-fall in the gully below him. The leader of another party, a very efficient guide, had taken his wife and brother-in-law up that gully and was standing on a horizontal slab, which had been used for

tens of years as a stance, to take the rest of the party up. The frequent rains during the past weeks must have loosened the foundation round the slab and it suddenly crashed down, burying all 3 climbers.

On hearing the details I had to think of an incident many years ago when I saw a horizontal slab, much smaller than the one which had caused this accident, and tried to put my hand on it to use it as a stance. I still remember my terror when I felt it moving downwards. I tried to ease it back into the old position and succeeded but I know now, hearing the tragic story, how lucky I had been at the time.

92 The 4000m peaks of southern Iran (This and next 8 photos and maps: G. Sheridan)

