In the Footsteps of Gervasutti

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(*Plates 47–51*)

The 1930s have come to be regarded as one of the golden ages of alpine climbing. During this period there was a huge surge in standards, and the great N faces of the Eiger, Grandes Jorasses and the Matterhorn were first climbed. Competition was fierce for these prestigious ascents, mainly between German and Italian teams, and each nationality achieved notable successes. Firmly established within the Italian camp was Giusto Gervasutti. Widely regarded as one of the most talented climbers of his generation, he made first ascents of several of the finest routes in the Western Alps. Today, his climbs are not as well known as Cassin's, for example, but whilst Cassin succeeded more often by careful planning and determination, Gervasutti's routes were imaginative and often very modern in concept. His greatest rock routes carry their reputation to this day for difficulty and seriousness.

Reflecting over my own 15 years of alpine climbing, I realized that Gervasutti's climbs, more than any other, have provided some of my most challenging and satisfying ascents. I must admit to a love of wild and empty places, and the desire to visit these is often as strong as the urge to climb itself. This perhaps explains why Gervasutti's routes, which are often remotely situated, have such an appeal. For others who share my fascination with some of the less well known corners in the Alps, I have tried to give a taster below from some of my own experiences on Gervasutti's greatest rock routes. Those with a keen sense of alpine history will realize that I still have to climb the Right-Hand Pillar of Frêney and the SE ridge of Pic Gaspard to complete the collection!

North-West Face Olan (1934)

1934 was an important year for Gervasutti. He followed an expedition to the Andes with a good summer season and his first major alpine new routes. After making the first ascent of the E face of Mont Blanc du Tacul by the couloir that now bears his name, he met the French climber Lucien Devies. Soon after, Devies suggested they set off to the Dauphiné to attempt the NW face of the Olan.

The ascent of this 1100m high rock wall, on their first attempt, was remarkable since neither of them had seen the face before. They climbed the well-defined spur to the right of the huge central couloir, although they did

briefly consider taking the direct line up the impressive steep wall to the N summit. (This direct route was climbed in 1956 by Desmaison and Couzy.) Hard rock climbing in the Dauphiné in the early 1930s was unheard of, and there were no climbs in the TD category on the French side of the Alps at all at that time.

My own experience of this route began in August 1990, when Guy Muhlemann and I crossed the little Maye glacier. After several years' absence from summer alpine climbing, I had forgotten about the hollow-stomach feeling during the pre-dawn approach to a big climb. However, as always, this soon disappeared after we had crossed the bergschrund. We moved together up the initial 300m slabs, with a peg every ropelength or so to point the way. At the first steepening I belayed and Guy led through up a steep IVsup corner. I always seem to find pitches of IVsup desperate, and this one was no exception, with steep out-of-balance moves on loose awkwardly spaced holds. Guy found it hard too, and we wondered how we would find the pitches of VI higher up the route.

Above, easier climbing led to the Yellow Tower, the 150m crux section. Uncertain of where the exact line lay, we traversed right and then back left to enter a compact dièdre system. This led to the very crest of the spur, probably some way to the left of Gervasutti's line. The rock, which up until now had been on the loose side, now deteriorated alarmingly. Guy made a very delicate lead up the steep arête, gently pushing the rock back into place and taking care not to dislodge several huge and precariously poised blocks with the rope. Following, I was unable to reproduce Guy's finesse, and several large blocks went crashing down the face below me.

The rock improved only slightly above, but the angle eased. To our left, on the Couzy route, we could see the two French climbers we had met the day before. We had spent a convivial evening together, whilst Serge, the hut guardian, fussed over us and cooked a magnificent dinner. Shouting across, we exchanged greetings. The sight of the two tiny red dots below the immense headwall added to the savage atmosphere and accentuated the vastness of the wall.

Near the top of the face we entered the great couloir and arrived at the *brèche* below the central summit. Gervasutti and Devies descended the complicated W ridge from here, but we were keen to reach the top of the 'Dru of the Dauphiné'. The climbing up to the central summit and traverse across the higher N summit was easy but spectacular. To the north and east the Dauphiné mountains were spread out before us, and it was a real privilege to be alone on the top of such a wild mountain.

We descended the N ridge, traversed across the top of the Sellettes glacier and crossed the Brèche de l'Olan to take us back below the N side of the mountain. We stopped to watch the sun setting on the route. The climbing and quality of the rock had been poor, but the savage grandeur of the face had made it a deeply satisfying day. Happy and content, we raced down to the Fond Turbat hut, wondering what delights Serge would have prepared for dinner that night.

Croz Spur, Grandes Jorasses (1935)

The following year Gervasutti was one of the main contenders in the race for the N face of the Jorasses. Much of the early attention was focused on the Walker Spur, but Gervasutti was convinced that the central spur leading up to Pointe Croz would prove the easiest route. In 1933 he had climbed the couloir running up behind the first two towers at the bottom of the spur, but a storm forced a retreat. Gervasutti then tried in 1934, when three other teams were on the face, but again bad weather made them descend.

By 1935 the face was still virgin, but international interest was so great that when he arrived at the Leschaux hut on 30 June there were German, Swiss and French parties already on the face. His companion Chabod was so upset that he wanted to go down and climb elsewhere, but Gervasutti was insistent they try anyway, and see if they could catch the leaders up. That afternoon the French and Swiss teams descended, leaving only the two Germans, Peters and Meier, on the face. Later that evening, the Swiss guide Lambert with Loulou Boulaz arrived at the hut, and all four started the route together the following morning.

The mountain was in remarkably good condition for so early in the season and they made good progress, but were hit by a violent storm about half way up the face. They bivouacked near the notch above the upper icefield, and the following day Gervasutti led the party up the final icy 150m to the top to make the second ascent. This one had got away: Peters and Meier had beaten them by two days.

7pm, 13 October 1983, Grandes Jorasses: Our bivouac site, in the notch above the upper icefield, was probably very close to where Gervasutti must have stayed. As I wriggled into my sleeping bag, I thought back to the lucky sequence of events that had got me there. I'd arrived in a deserted Chamonix with a week's holiday on the off-chance of finding a partner. Kevin Doyle, a Canadian who had spent the summer ticking off many of the famous alpine faces, was keen to add the Jorasses to his impressive tally before returning home. With a day and a half of good weather forecast we decided on the Croz, but our tight schedule went awry from the very beginning. We spent the first good day drying our clothes outside the Leschaux hut after being caught in a wild storm on the glacier!

Kevin had been confident of climbing the route in a day, but a late 8am start meant we were now well short of the summit ridge. However, the climbing had been superb. The icefields had been perfect névé, the couloirs choked with squeaky white ice, and the crux slabs had iced over to give two sustained 50m pitches. So far the Croz had been like climbing two Orion faces, stacked on top of each other on a super Ben Nevis.

According to the forecast the storm should have already arrived, but the weather still appeared good. I had a faint suspicion that the stars were not twinkling as brightly as they should, and spent much of the night worrying how much longer the weather would hold.

The first wisps of cloud appeared from behind the mountain at 6am. As

predicted, the front was moving in from the south. By 6.30 it was snowing hard, the mountain was completely clagged in and we were frantically stuffing gear into our sacks in the dawn gloom.

The final 150m of the Croz is generally reckoned to be the crux. There are two alternatives: one can either follow the crest of the spur directly to the summit of Pointe Croz, or, more easily, take a steep gully system about 50m to the right. There was no discussion about which option to take, and we immediately set off traversing right towards the gully. Already 15cm of fresh snow was piled on the rock, the protection was poor and the rock suspect. Our progress was slow. After what seemed an age we entered the gully and clawed our way up steep black ice and shattered rock all covered in a deep white blanket. At midday we pulled out on to the summit ridge and were met by the full force of the southerly gale.

We couldn't stand in the wind which was wrapping the ropes around the rocks on the ridge, so we unroped and crawled over the summits of Pointe Croz and Pointe Whymper. Snow slopes now led to the col where we could descend the icy slopes of the S face. Visibility was reduced to only a few feet and we were relying on my memory of descending the mountain the previous summer.

By the time we reached the Rocher du Reposoir we were floundering through waist-deep snow. What had been a sustained scramble the summer before was now more like a swim, but eventually we slid down the lower rocks to the Grandes Jorasses glacier. Unable to find the hut we spent the night in a crevasse.

The following morning the storm had stopped, but the visibility was still poor. We soon discovered that we had spent the night less than 100m from the hut, but we weren't bothered now as the valley was in sight.

I don't know why, but well below the hut we looked back at the way we'd come. There was a tiny pocket of blue sky above the Croz, and as we watched a red dot appeared in the centre of it. I joked to Kevin that it was a rescue chopper. The red dot traversed the summit ridge, and then started to descend following our tracks. We were two days overdue, and it didn't take us long to realize that this really was a helicopter looking for us. We waited and soon it was hovering above us with a soldier from the mountain gendarmerie being lowered down to meet us.

'*Bonjour*,' he said, 'where 'ave you come from?'

'Grandes Jorasses.'

'Which route?'

'The Croz.'

'Who 'as called out the 'elicopteur?'

I was stunned. How on earth could we possibly know?

'Er . . . Jules,' I stammered, 'Julian Mills.'

The name of the only person we both knew in Chamonix seemed to be the right answer, for he signalled to the winchman to get ready to haul us up.

'But we're OK, thank you very much. We don't need rescuing.'

The gendarme looked at us hard, nodded, signalled to the winchman, and disappeared back up into the helicopter. Within seconds it had gone and there was total silence again.

We had mixed feelings. It was touching that someone cared and was worried about us, but the incident had disturbed our sense of isolation. We both desperately wanted to finish our adventure by ourselves.

The Val Ferret road was blocked by snow, and we had to walk to Entrèves where we caught a bus. We were the only passengers, and the driver was so excited to hear that we had just climbed the Jorasses that he took us through the tunnel for free. Later that evening I went to the Chamonix rescue to thank them for coming to look for us. Rather than scold us for knowingly climbing in such atrocious weather, they raved about the winter-like conditions on the face and wanted to know every detail of our ascent! It had been a good week away from work.

North-West Face Ailefroide (1936)

The NW wall of the Ailefroide was the culmination of Gervasutti's partnership with Devies. Their route is often referred to as the Walker Spur of the Dauphiné, but it is infrequently climbed with perhaps only two or three ascents each season.

The face is huge, over 1000m high and more than a kilometre wide. Although it had not attracted the same attention as the Jorasses, it was very much in 'the last great problem' class. Eager not to miss out again, after being so close on the Croz the year before, Gervasutti started the route despite an accident on the glacier where he broke two ribs. To add to their problems, on the climb itself Devies suffered from appendicitis.

The route takes an elegant and logical line, following the pronounced spur in the lower half of the face. They climbed the blank slabs above, and found a way through the impregnable looking headwall. The bottom of the climb is very serious, for to reach the foot of the spur you must cross the Coste Rouge couloir, a notorious stonefall shoot.

3am, 4 August 1990, Coste Rouge glacier: It started as a rumble but soon a huge echoing roar shook and filled the glacier basin. We had been woken yet again by a large rockfall. It was as though a dumper truck on the summit ridge was emptying tons of rock down the face. Guy Muhlemann and I had joked the evening before about 'Messerschmitts and Spitfires' zinging down the face, but we didn't expect major rockfalls well into the night. Guy suggested that we should wake early as planned, and if a single stone fell whilst we were making breakfast we would abandon our attempt. For my part, having seen more rocks fall down the face than I had in the whole Alps put together, I decided that a dry 1990 summer meant the route was definitely off. I was bitterly disappointed but kept my thoughts to myself.

At 5am Guy started making coffee and we ate our breakfast in silence. All was quiet. Another cup of coffee . . . still silence. Slowly we packed our sacks, roped up and without a word crossed the glacier to the foot of the face. Guy stopped at the glacier edge. A single stone bounded lazily down the rocks and landed in the snow beside us. We spoke for the first time.

'We're committed once we cross the "schrund",' Guy said.

I paused. It was already light, we were late and I knew my silent decision last night was the correct one. My reply came as more of a surprise to myself than to Guy.

'There's only been one stone, let's go for it!'

We changed up a gear and were soon moving together up the initial 100m slabs. Hearts in mouths we crossed the Coste Rouge couloir and continued moving together up slabs to reach the base of the spur. At the first steepening we lost the way and took a harder variation to the left before regaining the crest of the spur. 'You have to pretend you're Gervasutti, and always take the easiest line,' I grumbled to Guy at the top of the excellent but unlikely pitch. We continued up the spur and six hours after crossing the bergschrund we arrived at the foot of the Grey Slabs.

Still no stones had fallen down the face and it was tempting to relax a little, when a huge rockfall roared down the full length of the Coste Rouge couloir below us. Two climbers silhouetted on the summit ridge were clearly the cause, but the event unsettled us and we felt very small and vulnerable in the centre of the vast wall.

There was no obvious line up the smooth slabs above which were scarred with pock-marks from thousands of falling stones. Guy led off on what had now become the psychological crux of the route. The route-finding was difficult, the protection well spaced and our position felt very exposed. Only two stones fell, but nevertheless it was two relieved climbers who arrived on the crescent-shaped ledge three pitches later.

The headwall was now bathed in the afternoon sun, and despite reports we'd heard to the contrary the rock was firm with good holds. We made good progress, and the pitches improved with height. In particular, an absorbing ropelength up an icy chimney with rock-boots carefully positioned on ice-free rock stood out as being particularly enjoyable. Above, the route took an unlikely and spectacular finish heading towards an immense overhang which was avoided at the last possible moment with a tricky rock-wall on the left.

We neglected to go to the W summit and descended the ridge a little way before dropping down to a bivouac on the Ailefroide glacier. The following day we made a leisurely descent, dropping into the Sélé hut to record the second ascent of the season. As we walked through the pinewoods below, I reflected that never before had I come so close to failing on a route without even leaving the bivouac. It was two very satisfied climbers who toasted their luck over dinner in Ailefroide later that evening.

South-West Face Gugliermina (1938)

Gervasutti was determined to make an attempt on the Eiger during the summer of 1938, but following Heckmair's success in July he immediately switched his attention to the last and perhaps the greatest prize of all – the Walker Spur. It was not until August that he was able to make an attempt, only to learn on the walk up to the Leschaux hut that his fellow countrymen, Cassin, Esposito and

Tizzoni were already established on the face. Gervasutti and Ottoz started the route that afternoon nevertheless, but a storm when they were in the region of the Rébuffat crack sent them down to the glacier. Meanwhile Cassin and his Lecco team were sufficiently high on the face to be able to force their way to the top. Later, Gervasutti said that his disappointment was softened by the fact that victory had gone to Cassin, but it must have been a bitter pill to swallow, for none of the Lecco party had ever even seen the Leschaux cirque before.

In his autobiography[1] Gervasutti writes philosophically about being beaten yet again to a major first ascent on this face. One can sense the relief, however, that the race for prestigious lines was now over, and there was no longer any need to compete. Of the Walker and Eiger N face ascents he wrote:

> There did not now seem to be any other wall whose ascent would constitute a problem big enough to warrant its becoming an object of competition on a national scale. So mountaineering once more became a personal affair, and a new route the private creation of the climber.

On his return to Courmayeur he met his old friend Gabriele Boccalatte. They decided to attempt the SW face of Pointe Gugliermina, an elegant rock pillar on the S side of the Aiguille Blanche de Peuterey. Of all Gervasutti's routes this is perhaps the one that is best known today. Apart from a pendulum high on the face, they climbed the route almost entirely free. Subsequently it was hailed as the most technically difficult pre-war rock climb in the Mont Blanc range. Later ascents confirmed the beauty and delicate nature of the climbing and, unusually for a major Gervasutti route, the climb has achieved a fair degree of popularity. It is even included in one of the recent topo guides to Mont Blanc, retaining a modern TD grade and rubbing shoulders with the bolt-protected desperates of the 1980s.

Roger Everett and I made an ascent in the summer of 1983. In common with many of Gervasutti's routes the approach is a long one, and the crossing of the Col de l'Innominata and ascent of the chaotic Frêney glacier to the foot of the face demands a certain degree of mountaineering ability. Therefore we were surprised and a little disappointed to see a party of three already bivouacking on a series of ledges at the foot of the face.

We spent a comfortable night on a glacier rognon and made an early start the following morning, taking the other party by surprise as we quickly caught up with them. They turned out to be two guides with a well-known French lady client. The charm of the lady was contrasted by the aggressiveness of the guides who would not let us pass. They eventually let us through when they realized that Roger spoke fluent French and understood their bad language, and that we seemed quite prepared to move together up pitches of V whilst still carrying coils. Above, we resumed a more conventional style, and wearing rock-boots and carrying minimal sacks we made fast progress and were on the top well before midday.

The descent, with EB's crushing tired toes, down the loose Schneider couloir seemed to last forever. Eventually, six hours after leaving the summit,

we reached the rognon and our bivouac gear. Gervasutti had taken half that time to descend. I'm sure he would have laughed!

East Face Grandes Jorasses (1942)

This route was undoubtedly Gervasutti's greatest climb, not equalled in difficulty until the 1960s with the American routes on the W face of the Dru and S face of the Fou. Gervasutti had no competition for this line, and he made four attempts spread over five years before he was eventually successful. Even today, Gervasutti's route carries a reputation for seriousness that has few parallels in the Mont Blanc range.

2am, 19 July 1982, Frebouze glacier: Nick Kekus banged shut the wooden door of the empty little Gervasutti hut, and slowly we wound our way up the contorted glacier to the Col des Hirondelles. We were astonished to find two French climbers bivouacking there who said they were also going to climb the E face. I couldn't believe that, after only six ascents in 40 years, two teams were going to be on the face at the same time! The spell and aura of the route's inaccessibility began to dissolve in front of me, until further questions revealed that they were going for the Hirondelles ridge after all.

The ascent to the col had taken three hours and we were already behind time. Our success depended on being able to avoid the stone-swept 'Y' couloir in the lower third of the face. Once we were established on the concave bulging walls above, the stones would fall well out into space behind us. The French Vallot guide had provided the key to avoiding the couloir, with a description of Marmier's winter variation (climbed on the fourth ascent), which took a circular line to the left. Our strategy involved climbing this before dawn when the first of the sun's rays would start the barrage of stones down the lower part of the face.

From the col we traversed left, crossed the bergschrund and climbed a small icefield. We traversed left again and then back right as dawn broke and the first stones began to fall. Fortunately we were now following a ramp sheltered from above by an overhanging wall. We quickly crossed the 'Y' ledges, avoiding the whining stones, and were soon established on the central wall. We were now safe, but our satisfaction was tempered after the second difficult pitch by a violent hailstorm. It was still early, and we were hopeful that the storm would soon pass. After all, the normally cautious weatherman at the Chamonix meteo had promised *grands beaux temps*. When the hail turned to snow we knew we were in for a long wait, and we retreated under our bivouac gear. Well into the night we were blasted by another ferocious hailstorm. The weight of the ice between us and the rock pushed us off our ledge and we were left hanging on the belay.

I spent much of the night thinking of reasons why we had to continue the following day. Retreat down the face would be too dangerous, I argued, and the hard pitches above would soon clear in the morning sun. I hadn't climbed before with Nick who was surprised that I should be worried that he might want to descend. There was no question, we would continue.

Our persistence was rewarded by an immaculate series of pitches up steep cracks and grooves on the left side of the wall. The pitches were sustained at V+ and VI and we were grateful for our rock-boots. The snow had melted quickly from the ledges, but often the cracks were streaming with water. We had been concerned about whether our meagre supply of pegs was up to the A2 aid pitch on blade pegs, but this proved reasonably straightforward with wired nuts. The slab above, however, provided the hardest lead on the route, and involved teetering over a series of wet streaks with minimal protection.

We bivouacked on the terrace at the top of the slab, but not long after nightfall we were treated to a storm even worse than the night before. At first the storm centre was behind us, somewhere over Mont Blanc, but suddenly it moved very close. Without warning there was a deafening bang and we were both thrown up into the air. My head felt as though it had been hit with a sledgehammer, and I was aware of a strong smell of cordite. We realized we'd been struck by a ground current, and it was at least an hour before we had stopped shaking enough to get to sleep.

Dawn was a misty, murky affair, but before long we were heading up towards Pointe Walker with fresh snow covering the upper part of the Tronchey arête. Later that evening, back in Chamonix, we found a scorch mark on my helmet and three burn holes in the hood of my bivvy bag. We'd had a lucky escape, and I have been particularly wary of lightning ever since.

Epilogue

Describing the moment when Gagliardone and he reached the summit of the Jorasses after their successful ascent of the E face, Gervasutti wrote:

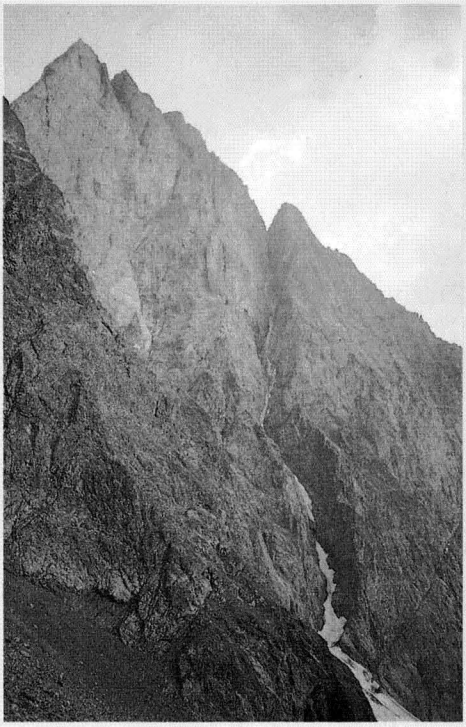
> We felt no shiver of joy, no ecstasy in victory. We had reached our objective, and already it lay behind us. How much finer it would be . . . to long for something all one's life, to fight for it without respite, and never to achieve it!

Down in the valley again, he decided that he 'should at once look around for another goal, and if it didn't exist . . . create it!'

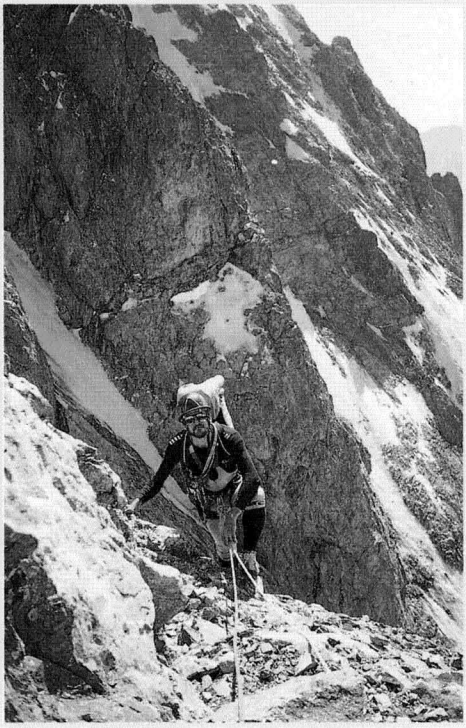
Sadly, this was Gervasutti's last great climb. He died in 1946 whilst trying to free a jammed abseil rope when retreating down a rock pillar on the E face of Mont Blanc du Tacul. This had all the makings of a typical Gervasutti climb, being a fine line in a remote and serious situation. The pillar was climbed five years later, and today it is considered to be one of the finest routes in the Mont Blanc range. As a tribute, it was named in memory of Gervasutti. Ironically, with the ease of access from the Midi téléphérique, the route is now more popular than any of his actual ascents.

REFERENCE

1 G Gervasutti, *Gervasutti's Climbs* (translated by Nea Morin and Janet Adam Smith). London (Hart-Davis), 1957. (Reprinted, Diadem, 1978.)



47. *Olan NW face, Dauphiné.* (Guy Muhlemann) (p 104)



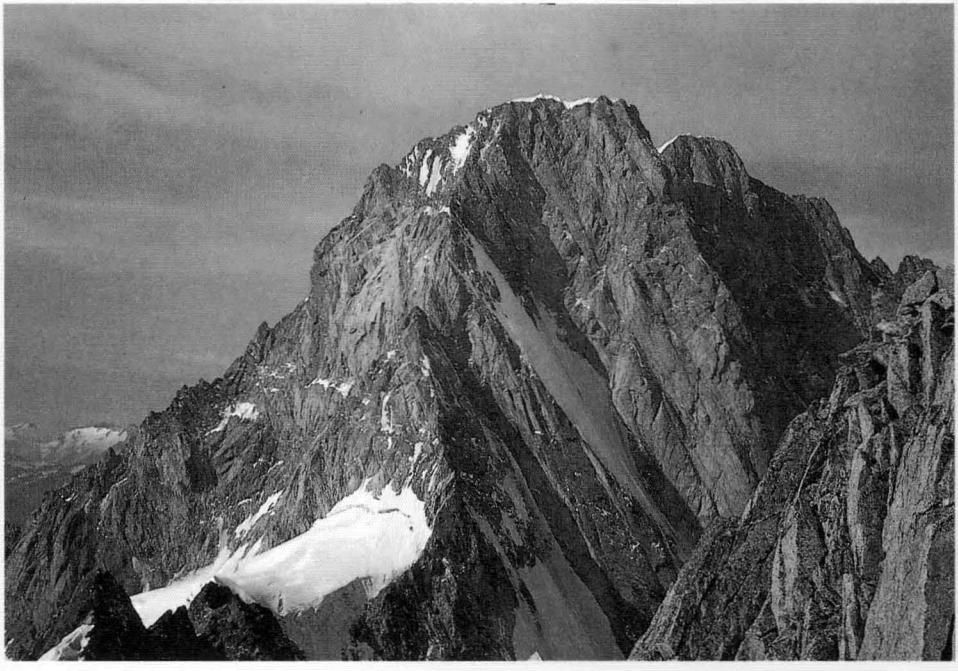
48. *Guy Muhlemann on NW face of Ailefroide.* (Simon Richardson) (p 104)



49. *Ailefroide NW face, Dauphiné.* (Guy Muhlemann) (p 104)



50. Grandes Jorasses N face after storm. (Simon Richardson) (p 104)



51. Grandes Jorasses from Petites Jorasses. Walker Spur and Shroud profiled right, Hirondelles ridge centre, E face on left. (Simon Richardson) (p 104)