

The author on the spot

What it's like to climb the highest unclimbed mountain in the North American continent

by William R. Hainsworth '18

THE ASCENT OF MT. VANCOUVER

THE SEWARD GLACIER STORM was running true to form when Walter Wood suggested I take advantage of the "socked in" day to jot down a few notes on the ascent of Mount Vancouver while memories were fresh. Immediately my thoughts wandered through a maze of trifling things. The layer of ice and frost crystals inside our shoes in the morning—the socks and inner soles which were frozen in our shoes when we tried to remove them before getting into the sack—the bowl and spoon which served all courses, finally coming clean with the coffee, which was almost strong enough to dissolve the porcelain—gasoline-impregnated supplies—the snow crystals which formed inside the tent and turned to miniature rainstorms when the sun announced a good day—the debates between nature and the fact that it was cold outside—these and similar trifles were the important things. Even the whiskbroom, which had first impressed me as a foolish luxury, gained respect after failure to use it resulted in puddles of melted snow on, and in, my sleeping bag.

The really important thing, of course, was that, for the second summer, Mt. Vancouver was included in Project Snow Cornice plans. The expedition was under the able leadership of Colonel Walter A. Wood, Director of the New York Office of the Arctic Institute of North America and President of the American Alpine Club. His long climbing and expedition experience in Alaska was the primary factor in the success of the trip.

Vancouver had a special meaning for Walt. In the summer of 1948 he had, in effect, opened up the Seward Basin territory with modern expedition methods, using air supply. Vancouver, rising to 15,850 feet, was the highest unclimbed individual mountain mass in the region (although it should be noted that Mt. King, with

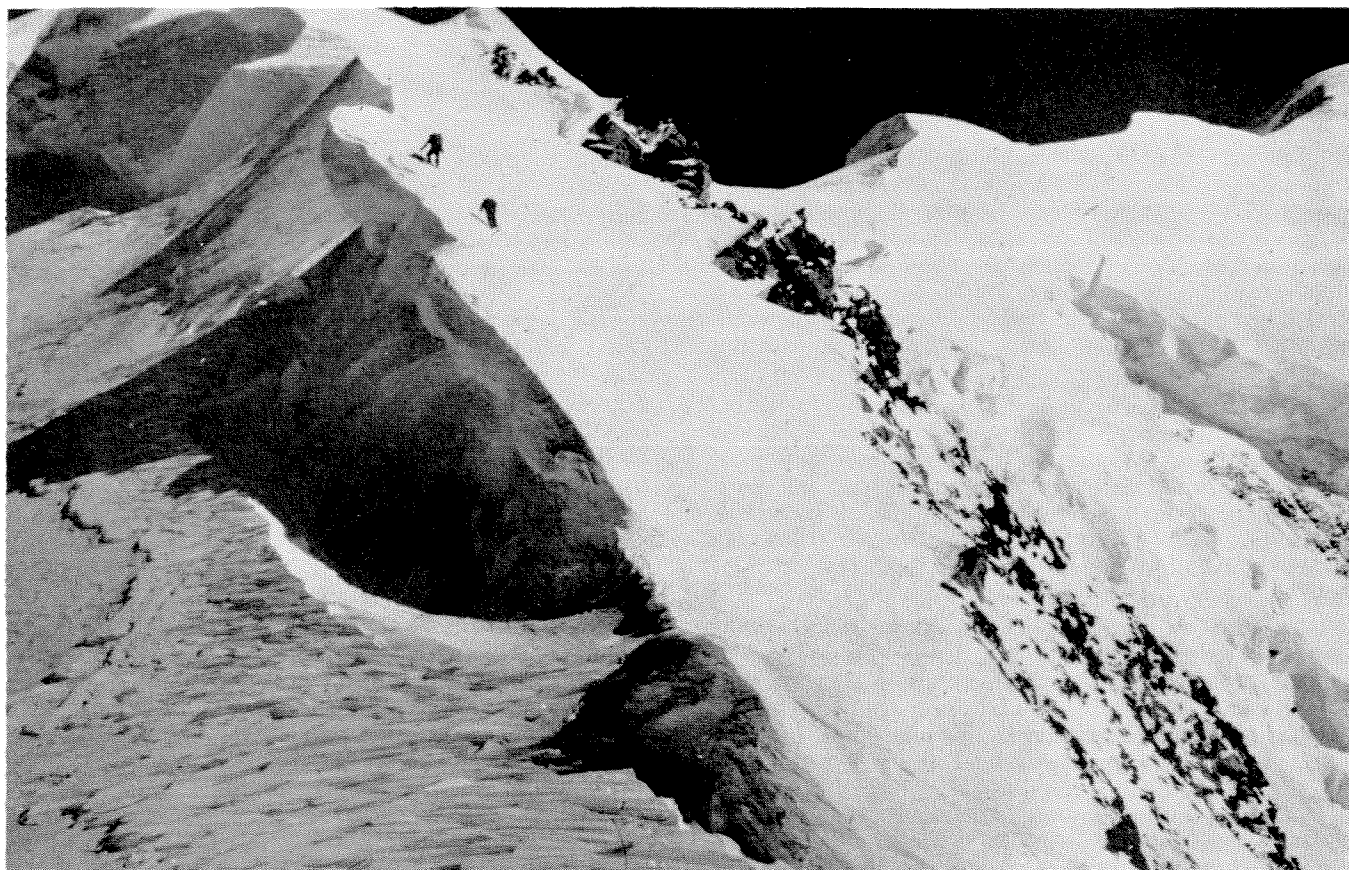
its 17,000 feet, is also unclimbed, and a beautiful mountain in its own right—though it is sometimes considered a part of the Mt. Logan massive). As president of the American Alpine Club, Walt saw only one course to pursue—climb the mountain! But that was not so easily done. The expedition plane turned over on a glacier landing. Since Walt was responsible for the expedition he stayed on the job to work out some means of getting out of the Basin. In the meantime, a party attempted the North Ridge, but was turned back by the approach of a severe coastal storm and a shortage of supplies. This left Vancouver unconquered in 1948—and even more desirable than before.

Since the climb was integrated with the scientific activities of the 1949 expedition we were able to take full advantage of the Norseman ski-equipped airplane support, parachute and drop loads, the comfortable facilities of a Jamesway base camp hut on the Nunatak (a rock island in the Seward Glacier) adjacent to Mt. Vancouver, and excellent food and equipment; all the result of many hours of hard work and planning long before the expedition reached the Seward Glacier.

I left New York by commercial plane on June 12, spent a few days in Seattle, and landed on the excellent airfield of Yakutat, some 300 miles north of Juneau, on the afternoon of the 15th. On June 16 Maury King, the expedition pilot, flew us in to the Nunatak. On July 5, I arrived on top of Vancouver with three companions.

But I'm getting ahead of my story.

First let's pause for a better look at the St. Elias Mountains, to which range Vancouver belongs. It is a land of vast expanses and deceptive distances, and a land of extremes. At times the midday glare and heat on the Glacier is almost unbearable. Storms come and



The choice of routes was reduced to the North Ridge—though it included several long and steep icy pitches.

go in a matter of hours—or last for days. Winds are high and cold—or there is a dead calm. The snow is as hard as ice one day and the next you sink to your knees in it. It is spectacularly beautiful, and the delight and despair of the camera fan: delight—because there is a daily temptation to photograph everything in sight; and despair—because the light meter needle repeatedly jumps beyond the end of the scale in its effort to warn against overexposure.

The basin of the Seward Glacier to the west of Vancouver, in which the base camp was located, is rather inaccessible, to put it mildly. It lies only 25 miles from tidewater, but the circuitous approach—over the Malaspina Glacier, or along several alternate routes over the Hubbard Glacier to the east of Vancouver—would normally require a great deal of time and heart-breaking labor in relaying supplies over heavily crevassed areas.

The basin itself is roughly 750 square miles, and is surrounded by the enormous masses of Mt. Cook (13,760 feet), Mt. Augusta (14,070), Mt. St. Elias (18,808), Mt. Logan (19,850), Mt. McArthur (14,400), and Vancouver. The basin appears relatively flat, has large areas free from crevasses, and has excellent landing fields, especially in early summer.

We were all well supplied with Snow Cornice and personal equipment. U. S. Army double sleeping bags proved to be very practical in combination with air mattresses. At the hut the outer bag alone was satisfactory, with occasional temperatures of 15 at night. To conserve weight, the inner bag only was used on the climb, with the lowest night temperatures about zero and moderate but gusty winds. I listened to several discussions at the Nunatak base camp on the alleged advantages of crawling into one's sleeping bag without benefit of

underwear, but decided to forego experimenting in this field. It seemed the better part of valor to retain some clothes and place the remainder between the air mattress and bag. Walt Wood's modified Mead tents, used in pairs, provided us with two bedrooms and a connecting vestibule. On two occasions the parachute loads dropped on the mountain provided a box which served as a storage cabinet and kitchen table when placed in the vestibule. Of much greater importance were the things which came to our door in the box. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the door came to the box, since two of our camps were established at the point where we found the parachute loads.

So it happened that we lived in comparative luxury on the mountain, thanks to the airplane and Walt's expedition philosophy. We had all the food supplies desired, and if anyone suffered for lack of equipment it was certainly not because it was unavailable. The 5 in 1 Army rations were supplemented with canned fruits, vegetables, and dehydrated foods. We were well supplied with raisins, dates, and figs. On the way up the mountain it was only necessary to back pack sleeping bags, air mattress, personal belongings, climbing equipment, camera and film, and daily food supplies. Coming down our loads became progressively heavier as we recovered essential equipment from each one of the three camps.

The mountain is a big mass, typical of those in the St. Elias range, and the selection of a route was not entirely obvious, even with the information gained on the 1948 experience. There are three minor summits on the mile-long summit ridge. An approach from either end seemed feasible, provided it did not involve a long summit traverse. This, of course, depended on the relative elevations of the summit peaks.

One purpose of the Arctic Institute studies was to determine accurately the elevations and positions of the peaks in the Seward Glacier area, and adequate equipment for the purpose was at hand. Walt established a 960-foot base line on the Seward Glacier and triangulated the summits with a theodolite which could be read accurately to five seconds. This corresponded to an error of 15 feet at the distance of the summit from the base, which is in the form of a symmetrically shaped pyramid. The North Peak was found to be 150 feet higher than the South Peak. A boundary survey had established the latter at 15,700 feet; therefore, Vancouver was found to have an elevation of 15,850 feet, with the North Peak the highest.

This reduced the choice of routes to the North Ridge, or a direct ascent up the glacier from the Northeast basin. It was agreed that the ridge would be best even though it included the prospect of several long and steep icy pitches. Actually, the snow conditions in July 1949 were considerably improved over August 1948, as observed by Bob McCarter, a graduate student at Stanford University, who was on both trips.

It was decided to establish three camps on the mountain; the first in a cirque just below the ridge, the second on the ridge, and the third on a slope behind Institute Peak, facing the final ridge. On June 27 the weather appeared promising, so Walt and Bob took off in the Norseman from the Glacier airstrip, with parachute loads containing tents, cooking equipment, food, some rope and other supplies. One load was dropped in the cirque below the North Ridge and another on the slope back of Institute Peak.

Our start up the mountain was a complicated affair, full of anticipation, weather uncertainties, and disappointments. On June 28, five of us got an early start on skis—Walter Wood, his son Peter, Noel Odell, a visiting professor of geology at the University of British Columbia, Bob McCarter, and I. Peter Wood had a badly cut finger. He had been nursing it for several days after a falling rock split it to the bone while we were looking for coney (a species of rock rabbit) on

Arctic Peak, just back of the Nunatak. Penicillin ointment proved very effective in preventing infection, but we had no sewing experience and the cut should have been stitched.

Our route lay up the comparatively flat glacial arm leading to the ice fall and cirque where we hoped to establish Camp I. By the time we parked our skis just below the ice fall, the weather had turned and we were confronted with low clouds and no sunshine. Nevertheless, it seemed best to go ahead and establish Camp I, which we did. Later that afternoon Bob McCarter and I went to the ridge above the camp and found the food cache which had been left there by the 1948 party. There was a high wind, with temperatures around 15 degrees and the cache was thoroughly frozen into the rocks. This part of our adventure ended with some extra food, a nipped finger, and a broken ice axe.

Since the weather was still uncertain the following morning Walt and I returned to the Nunatak to conserve supplies at Camp I and to get another axe. There we were pleasantly surprised to find that Alan Bruce-Robertson, a Canadian medical student and a veteran of the 1948 expedition, had arrived on the Glacier. He immediately packed to join the party. Right from the start it seemed to me that Bruce's pack consisted of about 50 per cent medical supplies and things which he insisted on carrying for other people. Now there were six planning to climb the mountain.

Air-Lift

Since there was a spare parachute load of tents and equipment at the airstrip it seemed a good idea to drop this at Camp I. This became a project for Maury King, our pilot, Bruce, and me. After receiving instructions we piled into the front of the plane to help lift the tail out of the snow, and took off. There was an oversized door-opening—equipped with no door—uncomfortably close to where we sat, so we tied ourselves in with ropes to keep from going along with the load when we pushed it out of the plane.

It was an exciting experience to observe the ridge from a few hundred feet above it and to push the load out on a split-second signal from Maury. And not the least of the excitement was the moment when Bruce grabbed my movie camera just as it was sliding out the door, trying to follow the load.

Walt, Bruce and I started from the Nunatak on the 30th to catch up with the climbing party. The snow was frozen so hard that we found it easier to tow our skis rather than wear them. Walt had in his pack a large can of gasoline for use in the Primus stoves, and on the way up he jokingly remarked several times about the "cloud cap" of gasoline vapors which seemed to be following him. Later this became serious and jokes turned into nausea. Nevertheless, we continued to Camp I. There, after examining Peter's cut finger, Bruce recommended that Pete return and agreed to accompany him back to the Nunatak the next day. Now there were four.

We continued to the ridge above Camp I, where it was cold and windy. We put on our parkas but unfortunately the fur on Walt's parka was saturated with gasoline. This was too much, and Walt became too ill with gasoline poisoning to go on. As leader of the party he overruled any plan to delay. It was a sad and difficult decision. I returned to Camp I with Walt, and arranged to join Noel and Bob later. They continued up the ridge to choose the site for Camp II.

At Camp I Walt asked Bruce to rejoin the climbing

GLOSSARY

At this point in Mr. Hainsworth's article, non-mountain-climbing readers may feel the need of further explanation of some of the terms used.

Here it is:

cirque—A theatre-like basin partly enclosed by steep rock walls and developed by glacial excavation—usually at the head of a canyon or valley.

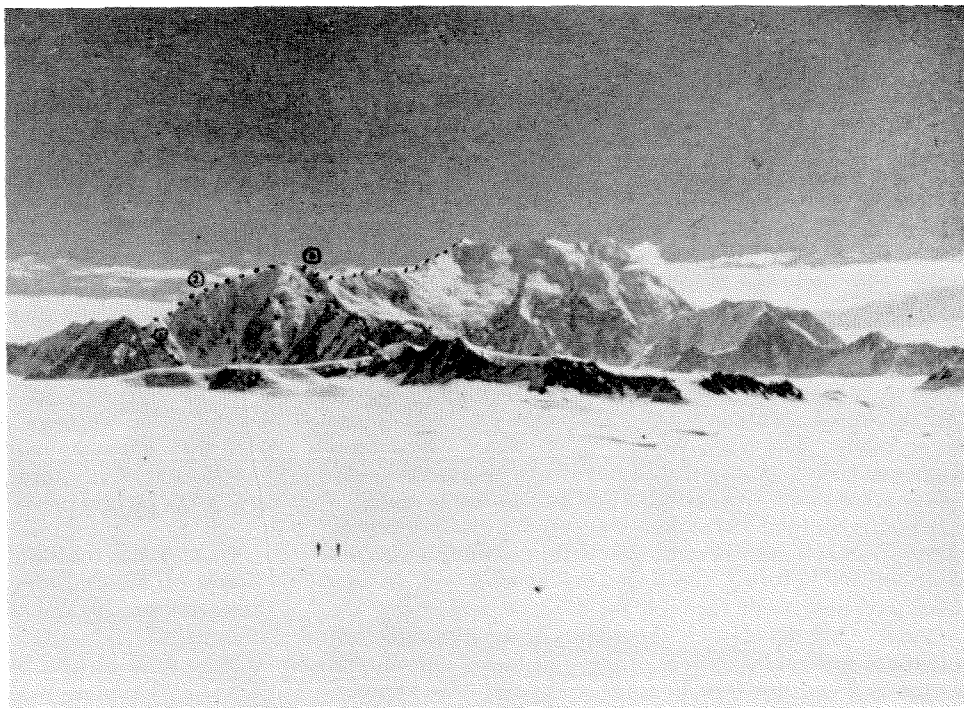
ice fall—Like a waterfall, only ice; where an ice stream descends a steep grade and is badly crevassed and broken.

col—Low saddle in a ridge or divide.

seracs—Great blocks of ice developed on ice falls or by crevassing and breaking up by sliding or glacial flowage.

couloir—A more or less U-shaped chute extending down a steep mountain slope.

Mt. Vancouver—as it looks from the Seward Glacier, 35 miles away—showing route followed by the climbing party and location of the three camps.



party, whereupon he packed up his usual quota of medical supplies and took some of my pack, and we proceeded to Camp II. We met Noel and Bob patiently waiting at the top of a steep pitch, at which point they had placed 500 feet of fixed rope. It was impossible to pass each other on the pitch, so they could not return for loads which had been left at the col until we reached the top of the pitch. Finally, at the end of a long day, all four of us were established in Camp II, with several days' provisions and a parachute cache somewhere on the mountain above, near a place which we hoped would be Camp III.

July 1 in Camp II proved to be cold and foggy. Bob and Noel finally tired of looking at the top of the tent from the inside and decided on a reconnaissance up the ridge. A rocky band flanked by ice and seracs looked rather formidable, particularly as it faded away into the icy slopes just below the next higher step in the ridge. While Bob and Noel were up above, Bruce and I went down to get the rope we had left in a fixed position. It looked as if it would be much more useful higher up. After caching the rope some distance above the camp we all assembled again at Camp II for a "5 in 1" repast.

The trip to the Camp III site was a matter of weaving back and forth, as directed by cornices, from slightly below the ridge to the ridge itself. As expected, we encountered two steep pitches with a thin snow coating over ice. These were about 40 degrees in places and required considerable care. A plateau below Institute Peak provided a breathing spell, but we were still confronted with a long traverse along the east side of the peak to a point considerably above the saddle between Institute and the final ridge. This seemed to be the only access to the slope where we could hope to find the parachute load.

On rounding the shoulder it was disconcerting to see ahead a slide mark—which appeared to be about the width of our parachute load—ending in a large crevasse. My toes were frostbitten and visions of a camp without supplies, or a long pull back to Camp II, began to take realistic form. Luckily, after some searching, Bob and Noel spotted a corner of the box—almost buried—with the red parachute covered with snow, and with the marker flag still in a horizontal position. With char-

acteristic forethought, Walt had tied a small shovel to the outside of the box. It was a pleasure to use this to clear a level platform for the tents on the 37-degree slope.

Following the usual pattern, the weather prevented an early start for the summit the next day, so we enjoyed an afternoon of wandering around on Institute Peak. Late in the day Walt and Maury King came up in the plane to look us over. The weather on the mountain, as observed from below, appeared excellent, and we learned later that it was puzzling to Walt to find we were not on the final ridge. Early morning fogs and cloud caps are deceiving unless you are in them.

July 5 seemed reasonably favorable, but not until the sun dispersed the morning fog. We started for the top at 7:00 A. M., Bob and I on one rope, Noel and Bruce on the other. The going was heavy and leads were switched often. Occasionally we placed willow wands but they were not needed on the return. There were a number of small cracks which were annoying to negotiate. Perhaps they were annoyed by our presence, to judge by the way they curled their upper lips at us.

We begrudged the loss of several hundred feet elevation while getting to the col between Institute and the final ridge, and again when we skirted a sizeable hump higher on the ridge which was decorated profusely with enormous seracs. About noon we built a small cairn on the flat rocky saddle between the hump and the final summit ridge.

We then came to the worst pitch encountered on the climb—ice covered with a film of snow. Estimated angles are always subject to impressions. The angle of this pitch permitted one to touch the snow with the fingertips while standing vertically in the step cut in the ice. One hundred and twenty steps and two hours of labor were left behind at this point.

Above the ice slope the fog closed in and it was difficult to stay on the ridge. This indeterminate area soon gave way to a sharp snow ridge, leading directly to the summit pyramid which we reached at 4:30 P. M. Frost-bitten fingers and toes, and a community feeling that we ought to start back right away, reduced our stay on top to the bare minimum required for pictures of ourselves, since there was no other scenery around. The ceremony

of raising the flag consisted of dropping a piece of red parachute cloth on the snow. Noel managed to find some rocks a few hundred feet below the summit and deposited our record in exchange for geological samples.

The return to Camp III was uneventful except for memories of the enormous chunks of lead that became attached to our feet on the uphill section just below Camp III. It does not sound reasonable, but I am sure I went to sleep for a minute or two while standing up contemplating that final slope. Although we were away from camp only 13 hours, it seemed a very long day.

Back to Camp II

On July 6 we started for Camp II. My diary reads: "We broke camp about 9:00 A. M. All was well to the lower pitch. The fixed rope area was easy. The final pitch was risky. A slip would have been bad because the belays were poor—ice only. Took two hours to descend 200 feet. Slipped twice but recovered without help of rope. Bob fell into several cracks but always managed to crawl out before I could get my camera out. In one place my boot went through on a slope and threw me forward. My head and shoulders broke through. It was quite a surprise to look along the under side of the bridge and see my foot hanging in space. No danger, but tough to get up with a pack on."

Bob and I reached Camp I at 8:30 P. M., having picked up some of the Camp II equipment. We could see Noel and Bruce moving slowly on the ridge above, but at 11:00 P. M. they were still above the col. We started back to help but they soon appeared above the camp. It turned out that Bruce had received a painful crampon spike in the ankle while jumping a crevasse and necessarily had to move very cautiously. At the top of the couloir above camp Noel removed his pack to adjust his crampons. In keeping with the spirit of the occasion the pack decided on a trip of its own and a few moments later stopped intact conveniently by the camp.

The hot sun not only had placed our camp on a pedestal during the time we were on the mountain, but managed to dish out the snow under the middle of the tent, much to our discomfort that night.

On July 7 we packed most of the gear into the drop box, attached ropes to it fore and aft, and started down, hoping to slide the box most of the way. After a minor struggle we reached the top of the couloir next to the ice fall. In spite of a 30-degree slope in the couloir the



Noel Odell and Bob McCarter at Camp II, which was established right where the parachute load was dropped.

box bogged down in the wet snow. We would sink to our hips trying to start the box sliding. Twice, in my zeal, I found myself head down the slope, pack over my head, and my legs firmly implanted in the snow on the uphill side. It took a lot of energy to get out. Finally we abandoned the box, after belaying it at the end of a climbing rope. Later on, snowslides came down the couloir and batted our box over to the side like a big pendulum.

It was a great relief to get back on our skis and an even greater pleasure to get back to the Nunatak. On the way down, the plane buzzed us and we tried to signal success by shaking our hands over our heads, boxer fashion; however, Walt and Maury thought we were shaking our fists at them for coming too low and it wasn't until we were all together again at the Nunatak that they knew we had had a successful trip.

CK 6 W to WXD

One of the outstanding memories of the whole affair is that of Walt's radio conversations between CK 6 W on Seward Glacier, and the Army station in Yakutat. Here's a sample:

"CK 6 W on the Seward, CK 6 W, CK 6 W, calling WXD at Yakutat, WXD W-X-D, 54321 - 12345, are you tuned in? This is Wood calling. Do you hear me? Over!"

"CK 6 W, CK 6 W, CK 6 W, this is WXD. We hear you loud and clear. Do you have any message? Over to you!"

"Ah, yes, WXD. We are in the glorious sunshine of Seward Basin, feasting our eyes on the Alpine glow of Mt. Cook, the Parrish beauty of St. Elias, and the bold, stark rays cast heavenward from Mt. Logan as the sun goes to rest on its broad shoulders. We know you enjoy the palms and wide expanses of the beaches of the Yakutat summer resort—but take your mind off that for a moment. We have news for you! Four of our boys have just come in from the first ascent of Mt. Vancouver. They reached the top on July 5 and had a very successful trip. I know you'll be pleased with the news. Over!"

"Oh, yeah? What in hell did they want to go up there for? Anyhow, congratulations. Now, about that missing box of seismographic equipment you were looking for. We located it in Juneau and will have it in your hands in a couple of days—weather permitting. That is all, unless you have something else. WXD signing off. Over!"



The four members of the climbing party who reached the top—Bruce-Robertson, McCarter, Hainsworth, Odell.