

The Story of an American Diplomat:

Hero in Striped Pants



Lofton rests after the grueling trip to volcano.

Editors' Note: Americans sometimes think of their diplomats as well-tailored gentlemen who attend state receptions and straighten out passport mix-ups. A bronze plaque at the State Department in Washington, D.C., testifies otherwise: it lists the names of 73 American foreign-service officers who have lost their lives serving their country. Countless others have risked death to help Americans in danger the world over.

The following story is a detailed account of one such foreign-service adventure, typifying the extraordinary challenges faced by some officers and the way they meet them, even when the chances of success are small.

ALL THROUGH the chill night, Harry A.M. Lofton and his companions had spoon-fed the semi-conscious man a bean and venison soup. Now, as the morning haze filtered in the grass adobe shack, Robert Kaupp, face still smudged with soot and feet numbed with frostbite, told his story to the American diplomat.

Kaupp had come to this unpopulated section of Ecuador from Los Angeles with a partner, Frank Rocco. They planned to climb to the Sangay volcano and photograph the cauldron of lava below. Only one person, Englishman Robert Moore, had ever ascended "the mountain of black snow," 17,750 feet at its peak, but Kaupp was an experienced explorer. He had led Rocco through a maze of jungle, mountain cliffs, snow, and volcanic ash and reached the rim successfully; the men were exhausted and felt strangely heady in the thin, pungent air.

Geysers of steam-hot lava burst overhead. Even in daylight the clouds of ash made it dark for the two photographers. They agreed to retreat from Sangay, but first they surrendered to an overwhelming desire to sleep.

By the time they awoke and stumbled off into a mist of ash and snow, Kaupp and Rocco were deep in a euphoria that fogged their awareness of surroundings. About two-thirds of the way down, clearer air brought Kaupp from trance-like detachment to an uneasy alert. For the first time, he noticed crevasses and sheer drops of 500 feet and more on every side. This wasn't the way

they'd come up: this was the wrong side of the mountain, an area pitted with craters barely visible in swirling clouds.

"Frank!" Kaupp yelled. "We've got to go back and come down the other side."

Rocco stared at him in disbelief. Kaupp repeated the warning: "Follow me!" Kaupp started toward the volcano again, but Rocco refused to move. The idea of returning to the hell above seemed to freeze him.

"All right," Kaupp said. "I'll get help. Stay where you are, and don't try to go down this side. It would be suicide."

Kaupp started upward. Within moments, the ceiling of black engulfed him. It would take days to escape the choking atmosphere; then Kaupp would wander alone in a jungle marked "Unexplored" on maps. Still it was their only chance.

Kaupp finished his story. Six days had passed before an Ecuadorian army patrol had found him semidelirious. Now he could think only of Rocco. "He could be alive," Kaupp told Harry Lofton. "At least I have to know."

Lofton is second secretary in the U. S. embassy in Quito. When word reached Ambassador Maurice M. Bernbaum that two Americans were lost on Sangay, he had sent Lofton to the scene. "Do what you can," were his only instructions. But to a foreign-service officer like Lofton, the instructions implied more. Lofton, 44 and the father of three, is an ex-football player, boxer, and Marine Corps officer. With him were two Ecuadorian mountain experts, Hector Vasquez and Jorge Larrea. They were willing to climb Sangay to learn Rocco's fate. But Kaupp, despite his determination, could not go with them: the climb had left him physically debilitated.

Lofton recounted the moment to FAMILY WEEKLY recently: "Kaupp was right. Rocco could be alive. There wasn't much chance, but you just can't walk off from something like that. Kaupp couldn't go, so it was up to me."

At daylight, Lofton, Vasquez, and Larrea led a train of Indian guides and bearers into some of the roughest country in the world. For 14 hours they alternately pulled pack animals, floundering to their bellies, from swollen streams or prodded them across mountain paths 18 inches wide. By evening they had reached the Ecuadorian army's farthest outpost.

"They had no lead to Rocco's whereabouts," Lofton said, "so we knew we had to ascend San-

gay in the morning and try to find his tracks."

Lofton had never climbed a mountain and had flown from Quito on such short notice he had only fishing clothes for the ascent. A steady drizzle soaked his outfit and, as the party moved into mountain downdrafts, the moisture froze. His feet and legs were rubbed sore by the time they had traversed the base, a field of jagged rocks spewn out by the volcano, but when he looked upward he realized this was the easy part.

"Directly ahead," Lofton reported, "was an ice face. It ran upward about 1,000 feet at a sheer angle. Vasquez and Larrea would have to chip out steps with their ice axes as they climbed and get me up with them."

But Lofton noticed the party was separating. The Indian guides and bearers had stopped, and the mountaineers were shouting at them and waving them forward. Instead, the Indians edged away, shaking their heads.

The Ghosts of Sangay

Larrea shrugged. "They refuse to go farther. They say there are ghosts above. The ghosts live in the volcano, turn the snow black, and make the earth pitch like a boat on waves."

Alone, the three began chipping their way up the glacier. Lofton had had specific instructions: "We'll be tied together. If you lose footing, we'll pull you up. Don't struggle."

Lofton followed their axe-hewn steps hesitantly. Each time his boot slipped, the rope would tighten quickly around him.

"Esperate! Hold still!"

Suddenly Lofton was pressing against the ice pack with little more support than the rope. His toehold had vanished; his fingers felt for a gripping spot, but he had swung away from the track. "Esperate!" the Ecuadorians repeated.

The glacier was a slick chute downward; if he fell, it would spin him directly into the rocks below. But he felt himself being lifted now. With his toes he probed again for the step and, as Vasquez and Larrea guided him, found reassuring firmness beneath his boot tip. They paused a moment. Given too much time, Sangay Mountain had a way of lulling men into a dangerous apathy.

"After the ice came the most miserable place I've seen," Lofton said later. "It was a sort of desert of relatively hot ash and lava which prevented ice from forming. Our boots would sink