

An American is lost
on an unexplored
volcano; probably
he is dead, but
only one man
can find out—a
U. S. foreign-service
officer who has never
climbed a mountain

By JACK RYAN



Search party with Lofton (second from right).



Plaque at State Dept. honors heroic diplomats.

into the ash. We would take two steps forward and slide back a foot, but if we stopped, the heat from the volcano would begin to get to our feet."

The closer they approached the volcano, some 14,000 feet up the mountain, the less they could see. They barely noticed how the soft ash erupted and puffed out belches of yellowish gas. The smell, like rotting eggs, permeated the air. Their movements became more sluggish.

"There was a constant rumbling, like muffled drums, under our feet. During the entire ascent it had rained a black sleet that left our clothes with a greasy coating. The heat and exertion made us perspire under our heavy clothing, yet ice formed on our caps and shoulders."

Before ascending, they had planned what to do at the lip. It would take some nine hours for the climb, more than half the daylight available. That would leave them no more than an hour at the volcano's head; then would come a rapid descent. At the rim, they would call for Rocco and probe the smoky crater with powerful lights.

Once at the top, though, this simple plan seemed terribly complicated. Somebody pointed to the faint yellow bursts of gas coming from the ground and put his hand to his throat in a choking gesture. Harry Lofton already knew what that meant.

"This obnoxious-smelling gas and the lack of oxygen were sapping our strength and causing us to feel suffocated," he recalls. Here was Sangay's hidden trap. Its sulphurous fumes were toxic. They bred a druglike indolence that made the most wary explorer prey for rockslides and hidden precipices he otherwise would avoid.

Curtains of Ash Limit Visibility

The men inched along the rim of the volcano, feeling more remote and indifferent with each step. At times, ash and fumes limited visibility to three feet; then Lofton knew that the others were with him only by the guiding tugs on his rope. A gust of wind rose suddenly. It sent clouds racing into the valley and, in the moments before a curtain of ash formed again, they saw bundles of equipment strewn ahead.

"We had found their camp site," Lofton reported. "Every statement of Kaupp's was verified. The equipment had been discarded. And farther on were tracks leading down the opposite slope." The discovery dispelled their lethargy, and they began to follow the trail. They had been

in the gaseous cloud almost half an hour.

The search party lost the tracks on a patch of snow but recrossed the volcano crest until they picked up the trail again. "We kept yelling for Rocco and flashing our lights into patches of darkness," Lofton said. But the only other sounds were echoes of an avalanche roar and hissing and rumbling from underground. They tried to fix their attention on the trail, fighting the urge to close their smarting eyes and rest a moment.

Lofton suddenly felt himself being yanked back by the rope. Startled, he shifted his gaze straight ahead. Through swirling haze, the ragged edge of a cliff emerged and the blackness of the sheer drop he had been heading for before his guides had recognized the danger.

End of the Brave Hunt

"Now we were in real danger of plunging over 500-foot cliffs," Lofton remembers. "We had followed the tracks down the west face until they were lost in ice, and the problems of oxygen, poisonous gas, and lack of visibility made going on impossible. We had been up there probably 45 minutes."

They returned to the crest quickly. Lungs and eyes seared, they moved half-seeing past the ghost camp and downward.

"We all agreed that there was little chance of Rocco's survival," Lofton said. "He had been without food and under conditions of terrible exposure for 10 days now. But at least we could tell people what probably happened from first-hand knowledge."

Rocco probably had died within minutes or, at most, a few hours after Kaupp had left for help. Most likely he had stumbled over a cliff; if not, he soon had suffocated or froze.

The possibility of recovering his body was remote because rock slides and avalanches constantly shifted the surface.

From his home in McClellandville, S.C., where he spent his leave before returning to Quito for a second two-year tour of duty, Harry Lofton answered the question of whether his dangerous climb had been needless.

"As long as there is a possibility a man is alive, other men ought to be willing to take a chance. Vasquez and Larrea, who were the real heroes, would have gone alone, I suppose, but that was an American up there; you don't ask other people to do your job for you."