



## TO THE TOP OF JAPAN

OF the thousands of New Zealanders who have now seen Japan, it is possible that one in a thousand has reached the top of Fuji-san. Here is an account of an ascent made last year by CAPTAIN J. M. D. HARDWICK, an English officer now living in Wellington

ONE sunny, sticky day in August last year, two American officers, a sergeant-cook, and I set off by jeep along the broad highway to Yokohama, 23 miles distant. We had decided over our morning coffee to add our numbers to those of the 50,000 and more Japanese who yearly make the ascent of that best known of all mountains, Fuji, during the climbing season. We were ill-suited for our venture, had we paused to consider it. One of the American officers would have overloaded any weighing machine in Japan, while the sergeant-cook, through protracted over-zealousness in his kitchen, had long since lost the sylph-like proportions of his youth. Between us, I suppose, we had walked about ten miles in the past month.

We passed through the outskirts of Yokohama, and along the smooth tree-lined road to Odawara, running within a stone's throw of the sea most of the way. From Odawara the road starts to climb and we were soon winding our way around the hills which tower up on either side of the Hayakawa river. The American who was driving had been a tankman in his more active infantry days and was unable to forget

it. The road was narrow and any vehicle coming the other way had to stop and go back or plunge into the ravine. The road passes on through Miyanoshita, the pleasantest little village I had ever seen or imagined, up to Gora, where we noticed many of the Germans who lived around that district until they were sent home recently. Within a few minutes of emerging from the road tunnel at "Long Tail Pass" we had our first close glimpse of Fuji. The mountain was half-hidden in cloud and looked black and rather cheerless. It was late afternoon as we dropped down to Gotemba and started the gentle climb towards the lower slopes of Fuji.

### The Wrong Approach

All sensible Fuji-climbers, we discovered later, approach by the Yoshidaguchi route from the North and descend by the Gotemba-guchi Sand Trail to the South. We, of course, were doing just the opposite. We drove on up the sandy and gradually steepening slopes until the overheated motor failed, then disembarked with our gear. Darkness was falling rapidly and the mountain towered grim and dark above us. A single light, far up the bare slopes, seemed to be our immediate objective, a hut, we guessed (we had scorned the idea of a guide) where we could spend the night,

and having locked the jeep we struck off upwards, following a line of telegraph poles spaced about 50 feet apart. The surface on which we walked was volcanic ash, gravelly and black, and we were soon having to rest at every pole. The incline steepened, the light seemed further away than ever, and when a dismal wind began to wrap us in damp rags of clouds, we turned our backs and set off downwards again to the jeep. We drove further down to a little tramping hut where the old Japanese in charge provided us with Japanese tea and some quilts, and we forgot about Fuji for the day.

At four o'clock the next morning we splashed ourselves with cold water and set off again. We left our entire impedimenta, with the exception of the K-rations, the water bottle, and a few other small items, with the old man. Progress was better this time, and by the time the sun came up we had reached a fair height. We passed the shack whose light, we presumed, must have been the one we had seen the previous night. It would have taken us a good three hours to reach it had we not turned back.

By now we were looking down on a sea of cloud, through which the sun presently burnt its way, warming the chill slopes of the mountain, and looking down through breaks in the cloud we saw the line of the road along which we had travelled, the lakes, a little volcano, green and extinct, and the green farmlands stretching away to the ragged purple coast of the Pacific in the distance.

Soon we discovered a zigzag route where many feet before ours had trodden the ash into a firm path, making the going much easier. But the slopes were steep and we had to rest more often. On either side of the path all the way were discarded straw sandals. There must have been millions of pairs and the approaches to the mountain had been littered with them too. The Japanese, we discovered later, buy them in the villages which skirt Fuji and wear them as overshoes to protect their footwear from the sharp little pieces of ash. They carry several pairs with them and discard them as they wear out.

There were signs of life on the mountain by now. Several people met us on their way down, and looking back we observed one or two coming up behind us. Our pride suffered severely when these shortly strode past us, moving at an alarming pace, and were soon reduced to dots high above us. We consoled ourselves by agreeing that they must have been used to walking up mountains since their youth, a theory that was supported a few minutes later when we were passed by two little boys and a girl, none of them a day over eight. We sat dejectedly and watched them climb out of sight, never pausing for a rest. By way of recompense, however, we later passed one man—the hardest working man I have ever met in my life. He was bowed under the weight of a whole telegraph pole which he was taking to the top of the mountain where a weather station was being constructed. I imagine that, like Gibbon when he finished writing his *Decline and Fall*, this solitary climber, when he reached the summit and laid down his pole for the last time, would feel that a great part had gone out of his life.

At intervals up the mountain are rest houses, little stone and wood shacks where the thirsty may obtain green tea and the weary may hire a few quilts to make up his bed. At the first of these we came to we each bought a wooden staff, and at subsequent "stations" the station mark was branded on with a red hot iron. We asked the daughter of one of these establishments how they obtained their food supplies and their food and water. "Oh, we go down the mountain for them," she said airily. Her face glowed in the morning light and her eyes sparkled.

### Into Thin Air

By now the lighter of the two American officers and I were far ahead of our heavy companions, their rests having become more frequent and of longer duration. We reached the seventh station and looked back, but could not see them, so we left the water container with a note. The countryside around Fuji looked very far away by now. The clouds had broken up more and the view was as seen from an aeroplane. In the distance, a long way below us now, were the Hakone Mountains, and in the haze beyond lay Tokio and Yokohama.

The surface on which we walked was now rugged rock and much easier to the feet, but the gradient had increased still further and the air was becoming rarefied. After one lap, attacked I suppose, a little too energetically, we both became dizzy and clung to some jutting rocks until the crazy feeling that we were about to slip off the face of the mountain had passed. Our breathing was laboured, our hearts pounded, and before long we found it necessary to rest after every thirty steps or so. The

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