

Oliver Sexmith Crosby (b. 1920) of Washington, D.C. was an officer in the United States Foreign Service in Iran and stationed in Tabriz, Iran at the American consulate during the time of his ascent up Ararat. In 1951, Oliver Crosby's party came within 150 feet of the Ararat summit as he recounted in the following article "Demavend and Ararat, 1951" from The American Alpine Journal 1954 edition pages 76-87. Crosby also climbed the Iranian mountain Demavend, the Matterhorn (first time up in 1949) as well as other Swiss, Greek, and Teton mountains. Oliver Crosby was an officer in the United States Navy during World War II in 1942-46 with 19 months duty on a destroyer escort in the North Atlantic and transferred to a cruiser in the Pacific in 1945 and ended his tour as a Lieutenant. He graduated from the University of Pennsylvania, received a Masters Degree from the School of Advanced International Studies in Washington, and was a Career Foreign Service Officer, serving in Athens, Tel Aviv, Tabriz, Berlin, Nicosia, Bamako, and Lagos. Mr. Crosby was United States Government Observer with the Belgian Antarctic Expedition in 1958-59 and was the United States Ambassador to the People's Revolutionary Republic of Guinea (what a title!) from 1977 to 1980 under President Jimmy Carter.

Chapter 9

1951 Oliver S. Crosby

The rugged bulk of Ararat, towering to a height of 16,945 feet out of the plain of Dogu Bayazit, was a thrilling and awesome sight. On its higher reaches vast, glistening snowfields swept steeply upward for over three thousand feet; a hanging glacier was perched on its south face. Massive rock buttresses lent a note of power and violence to the mountain, and cold, black rivers of lava wound some gigantic octopus. Here was a mountain with character and variety to match its size! The challenge of the peak filled us with quick suffocating eagerness.

We hurried to Dogu Bayazit to make the necessary arrangements with local officials, for my leave was almost ended, and time was precious. We found the local Sub-Prefect to be friendly but unenthusiastic about our climb, as they did not want cause problems with the Russians. He warned that Ararat was very dangerous, but after much argument he finally relented and granted us permission to proceed the following day. We were overjoyed.

Morning found us gathered outside the Sub-Prefect's house, studying possible routes up to the south face or along the east ridge. The day was one of the most sparkling beauty, and we were wild to be under way, but once again it was easier said than done. Even with the help of the Sub-Prefect, it took the best part of an hour to hire a driver and two oxen (!) to carry our provisions and climbing equipment. At long last we drove our jeep from Dogu Bayazit to a point just south of the mountain where we were to meet the oxen. They were late, and we had lunch.

The two beasts arrived about one-thirty, were loaded up, and we took off across a two-mile flat of volcanic ash and thence into the foothills of Ararat. The going was easy, and we had plenty of time to gaze at the mountain's great rock shoulders, its majestic snowfields, its glacier, and the tangle of ridges fanning out from its sides. The best route seemed to lead up the south ridge facing us, although the east ridge offered the advantage of a better view of Lesser Ararat. The latter was a symmetrical red-gray cone, which rose east of Ararat to an altitude of about 14,000 feet. Our inspection of the mountain was brought to a close by the gathering darkness, and it was night by the time we reached the Kurdish shepherd camp at about 11,000 feet, where we were to sleep. Our arrival caused great excitement, and we were at once surrounded by an admiring, chattering crowd which did not leave us until long after we had eaten and crawled in our sleeping bags.

The three of us were up at four the next morning, dressed, ate breakfast, loaded up for the climb, and attempted to set off. But our way was blocked by one of the armed guards of the camp, who made it clear that we were not to leave. We remonstrated; two more guards came over to support the first. It was apparent that the nomads did not want us to climb their mountain, but we were not to be put off now and raised a terrible hullabaloo. Our arguments, in broken Turkish and Persian, and the nomad consultations continued, as the east grew bright and the sun rose.

We were never sure just what their objection was, but finally, after four hours of wrangling, we were allowed to depart in an easterly direction. An escort was sent along to see that we did not turn in toward the south face of the mountain, so we were obliged to make the long detour around to the east ridge, crossing countless gullies, lava streams, and fields of jumbled black blocks as we slogged our way along. We soon outdistanced our escort, but by that time we were below the

hanging glacier, and there was nothing for it but to push on around. The traverse to the east ridge took two precious hours and gained us but little altitude; it was grueling work, and finally Pierce, who had done no climbing before, could go no further. He stopped to reset a bit and then returned slowly to the nomad camp to wait for us.

It was ten o'clock when Hermann and I finally turned our faces toward the summit of Ararat and began the real climb, starting up the east ridge from somewhere in the neighborhood of 12,000 feet. It was late, maddeningly late, but that could not be helped, and we were grateful to be on the mountain at all. The day was perfect, and the brilliant sunshine presented us with scores of breath-taking views of the south face of Ararat. We climbed steadily on the volcanic stone and moved up the ridge at a good pace.

About 1,200 feet higher we came into snow, which the hot sun had turned to slush. There was no apparent way of by-passing it, so in we plunged, slipping and sliding and wishing that we were on solid rock once more. Near the occasional outcropping of rock the snow was swept away entirely by swift rivulets of its own water. The earth and stones of the outcroppings were oozing with water, too, and not solid enough to stand on, so we were forced to continue the uphill battle on the snow. Progress was slow and exhausting; the snow slope continued on and on, all the heat of the sun converging on us from the great white reflector. Hermann and I pushed on, striving for altitude and working hard to keep our footing. Each step, carefully kicked in, was apt to collapse in front, in back, or on one side, breaking our pace and losing us precious time.

As we mounted in a steady zig-zag up the great snowy east side of Ararat, the air became noticeably thinner and colder, and we rejoiced to feel the snow harden under our boots. Finally, we stood well above the top of Lesser Ararat and were approaching the shoulder of Ararat proper at about 16,000 feet. By three-thirty, despite the fact that the sun was still well up in the sky, the cold had so increased that it seemed the chill of night was on the mountain. At the same time, a piercing wind struck us and rocked us about on our feet. The change in wind and temperature took place with phenomenal quickness as we entered the shoulder snowfields leading northwest to the mountain summit. The frigid upper reaches of Ararat had a wild, rugged look. Great boulders projected from the snow all around us, teetering on the verge of a meteoric plunge down the slope. To the left the head of the cracked and broken glacier wall was just visible, the thin strip and buttresses which rose almost 6,000 feet above our camp. Our route was plain enough and even gave promise of becoming less steep in time. We climbed on, watching the final peak of Ararat move nearer, grow larger and more distinct.

It came to be four o'clock and then four-thirty as we continued our progress upward through the boulder-strewn snowfield. The angle of the snow had not declined as much as we had hoped at the shoulder, but this at least allowed us to gain altitude and approach the summit more quickly. It loomed before us, tantalizingly close, and yet we seemed to move toward it at a snail's pace. The sun's outline became blurred behind a white haze of fine snow torn from the mountain and hurled across its peak by the east wind. Fortunately, this wind was at our backs, but still it reached into our muscles and lungs. The sun had no warmth to offer as it shown palely through the snow-filled air, and I began to recognize the threat, which the cold held for us. Our bodies no longer generated the heat that they had as we had worked our way up the mountain, and we were chilled through if we stopped to rest more than a minute at a time. The temperature fell further. It was five o'clock. The awareness which had been growing in our minds and which we had been trying to stifle would no longer we suppressed. We were verging on the point of no return.

There was no doubt that sufficient daylight remained to proceed to and reach the summit, which now lay directly ahead and some 150 feet above us, but this would leave us no time for the descent. We had to get ourselves off of three thousand feet of snow and ice before dark, for a bivouac on or near the summit of the mountain was out of the questions, and the nearest descent route was apt to be tricky, as it lay over the west end of the glacier and down onto the snow beyond it. To traverse that untried route at night would be inviting trouble.

Reluctantly, we turned back, left the summit route, and began the passage over the top of the hanging glacier, just above the wall's face. The snow was hard and uneven there, extremely steep in places and interspersed with stretches of ice. For long distances we cut steps with the ice-axe and proceeded, a foot at a time, changing the lead frequently. There was perhaps an hour of daylight left when Hermann, who was leading at the time, suddenly broke through the snow and dropped into a crevasse. As he fell, he managed to catch himself with an elbow on either side and I, straddling the hole, put a hand under each shoulder and helped him scramble up. We stood there for a moment, panting and wheezing with the exertion.

Handling the stiff climbing rope with stiffer fingers, we proceeded with utmost caution. The second time Hermann fell he was checked before he had got half way into the crevasse that blocked the way. Jumping across it, we continued to the end of the glacier, across the top of a swooping buttress and came upon the upper reaches of the long snow slope. It was almost seven o'clock and the sun had set, but in the gathering gloom we sped down the smooth snow, glissading part of the way and moving on the rope and axe where the going was more unsafe. The slope was sheltered on both sides, and for the first time the air about us was quiet. Gathering reserves we scarcely knew we had, we descended well over 2,000 feet in a half hour and neared the end of the snow.

It was now quite dark, and we were somewhere in the neighborhood of 14,000 feet. The air at this altitude was fortunately not so biting as it had been on top. We were below the glacier area and the snow was not so difficult to travel on if we proceeded slowly. Indeed it was a pity when we finally saw the last of it; from then on we moved in thick blackness, guided only by various lights in the valley, some of which we took to indicate the location of the camp a good deal to the west of our position. The sky was clear but the stars shed no useful light on the dark rocks over which we moved.

Traveling entirely by feel, we traversed buttness after buttness, couloir after couloir, moving slowly toward the west and that special ridge which should lead us to the camp. By eleven o'clock Hermann and I were exhausted, moving in a dream. We would ease ourselves down over boulders and across noisy but invisible streams until we could go no farther. Collapsing where we stood, we would hug the black rocks and lie there numbly. After about ten minutes, the cold would seep into us, tightening every muscle into uncontrollable shakes and forcing us to our feet and onward. The night was full of blind alleys, wrong turnings that brought us to precipices or difficult couloirs. We nosed our way around each obstacle like patient measuring worms, patient because there was nothing else to do.

At one o'clock we reached a cul-de-sac, for we found ourselves following down a ridge of loose rock which gradually slimmed to nothing, eaten away on both sides by converging torrents of water. There was little chance of our making it back up the crumbling ridge, and it seemed impossible to cross the cascading waters: we were trapped in the gulley, teetering on the very brink of the westernmost stream and enveloped in its clammy spray. Driven on by the cold and wet, we resumed our nosing about, moving with extreme caution. The rushing foam shone with a pale whiteness, interspersed with black spots where there were rocks or emptiness. By testing these dark islands with the ice-axe, we found a precarious bridge across the torrent. The crossing was harrowing and unbelievable, like the last minute of a nightmare in which one slips and slithers in darkness at the brink of eternity, but it was finally completed, and we were safely on the far side.

The worst was now passed, for the ridge we descended became progressively less cold and less steep. We began to obtain real benefit from our frequent rest periods, and the departing numbness gave place to a great sense of peace and accomplishment. Our descent after we got off the snow was in the most complete darkness. I don't recall seeing any boulders, large or small, where we found ourselves trapped at the end of the vanishing ridge between two roaring streams. And in fact I clearly remember we had to reverse course and climb a good way back up the ridge before we could find the stream diminished to the point that we could cross, feeling our way each step we took. If we would have attempted to cross the stream, that would have been certain death, and I know for a fact that we turned back and worked our way back up the ridge, still in complete darkness, until one of the streams was small enough to cross with reasonable safety (although wetly). I can still remember the frustration, exhaustion and grim-death nature of that retracing of our steps.

We made it back to camp at six in the morning. Ararat in the morning light is truly an agonizing night. And Mount Ararat is a great mountain, far more interesting to climb than Demavend. Already the memory of the agonizing night hours was fading before the priceless experiences and sights of the new day that lay before us.

