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North face of the Eiger

Is this the world's most perilous climb?

ONE hundred and twenty-five years ago, Irishman Charles Barrington went into the history books as being the first man to climb the Eiger.

At that time no one ever dreamt of tackling the formidable Eigerwand, the north west face. It was just a matter of being the first to the summit by any route.

Since 1935, the north face has probably been in the news more than any other mountain in the world. For all the great climbers over the past 40 years, the north face has been the ultimate challenge – a classic triangle of near-vertical rock and ice, towering 6,000 feet above Alpigen.

But it's not only technical problems which have made the north face notorious. The weather has often been the determining factor for success or failure on the Eiger, which is situated alongside two other towering peaks – the Mönch (the Monk) and the Jungfrau (the Virgin).

Until 1935, no one had died on the Eiger. But the north face changed all that.

Let's go back to August 11, 1858, when Barrington, on his only visit to Switzerland, conquered the Eiger. An accomplished horseman – he had won an Irish Grand National – Barrington was accompanied by two guides from Grindelwald, Christian

Almer and Peter Bohren.

From a letter Barrington wrote to his brother after the ascent, it seems that the Irishman was the leader. He was less impressed by the difficulties and dangers of mountaineering than many of his contemporaries.

Nevertheless, there came a point when the guides almost gave up. Barrington, undaunted, carried on alone until the guides decided they would follow.

At midday and just two days after conquering the Jungfrau, Barrington was pushed by the guides to be the first person on top of the Eiger.

The three spent ten minutes on the top, placed a flag there, and spent the next four hours on the descent.

When they got back to their hotel, local people were sceptical that the three had been on the summit, but a glance through the telescope at the flag they had left behind was proof enough.

The north face began making headlines in 1935 when it was tackled for the first time. Two young Munich climbers spent three days on the route before dying of exposure.

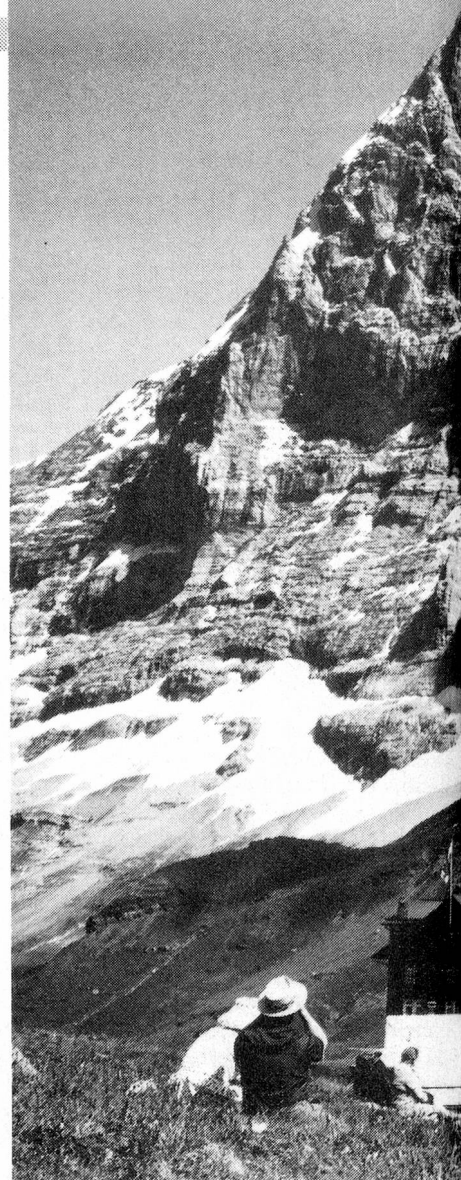
The following year, two Germans and two Austrians made another attempt. That climb ended in the worst accident in the history of

the Eiger. After deciding that the ascent was beyond them, the four decided to *abseil* down.

One fell. He swept another with him and a third was strangled by the rope. After spending an agonising night in the open, the fourth died of exhaustion after he'd roped down to within 10 feet of a rescue party of guides.

In 1937 two Italians were killed, bringing the death toll to eight.

Then, in July 1938, two Austrians and two Germans teamed up and spent three days on the mountain before achieving their ultimate





The toll: four lives a week

goal. Weakened by exposure and prolonged exertion, they battled their way to the summit through a blizzard.

Their success was rewarded by outbursts of criticism. Anyone who attempted the north face was considered mentally deranged.

A lot of the criticism, it seems, came from the Oberlanders. The climbers were called "publicity seekers" and the dangers of the north face were described as "unjustifiable".

Some of the German climbers of the 1930s were called Nazis, seeking glory for the Fatherland.

Since that first ascent, the north face has

claimed other lives and still retains its reputation as the most exacting test of skill and courage.

The Eiger – which means "ogre" in English – was back in the news again in August this year when two West German climbers were rescued by helicopter after being stranded for eight days.

But a final word about this 13,449 ft giant of the Bernese Oberland from the late British mountaineer Dougal Haston, who first climbed the Eiger north face in 1966. "I have felt more alone on the north wall than at Camp VI (27,000 feet) on the south west face of Everest", he wrote.

SWITZERLAND'S mountains claimed a toll of 206 deaths – including 81 foreign tourists – last year. This was a slight decline from the 1981 total of 217, according to Swiss Alpine Club statistics.

The fatalities included 103 killed in falls, 26 in avalanches, and 43 who succumbed to heart attacks or exposure. More than one third of the victims were more than 50 years old.

Lack of familiarity or experience and overestimation of physical strength were cited as principal factors contributing to the accidents.