

ALL
ELEVATIONS
UNKNOWN

An Adventure in the Heart of Borneo



SAM LIGHTNER, JR.

BROADWAY BOOKS NEW YORK

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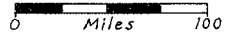
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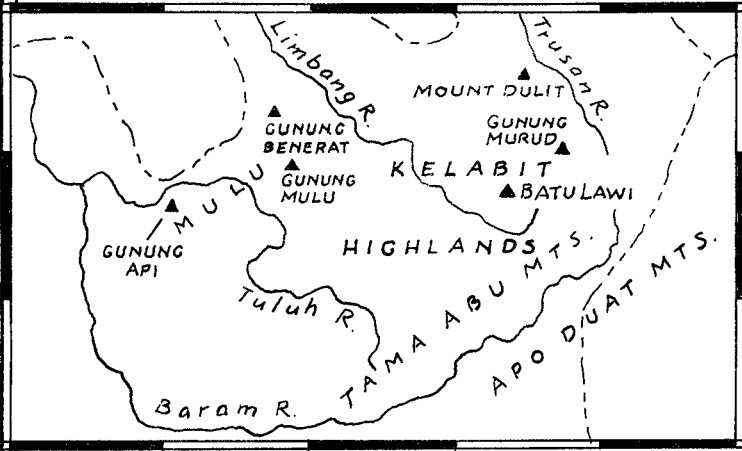
*This book is dedicated to
the men who fought World War II
on the island of Borneo.*

BORNEO

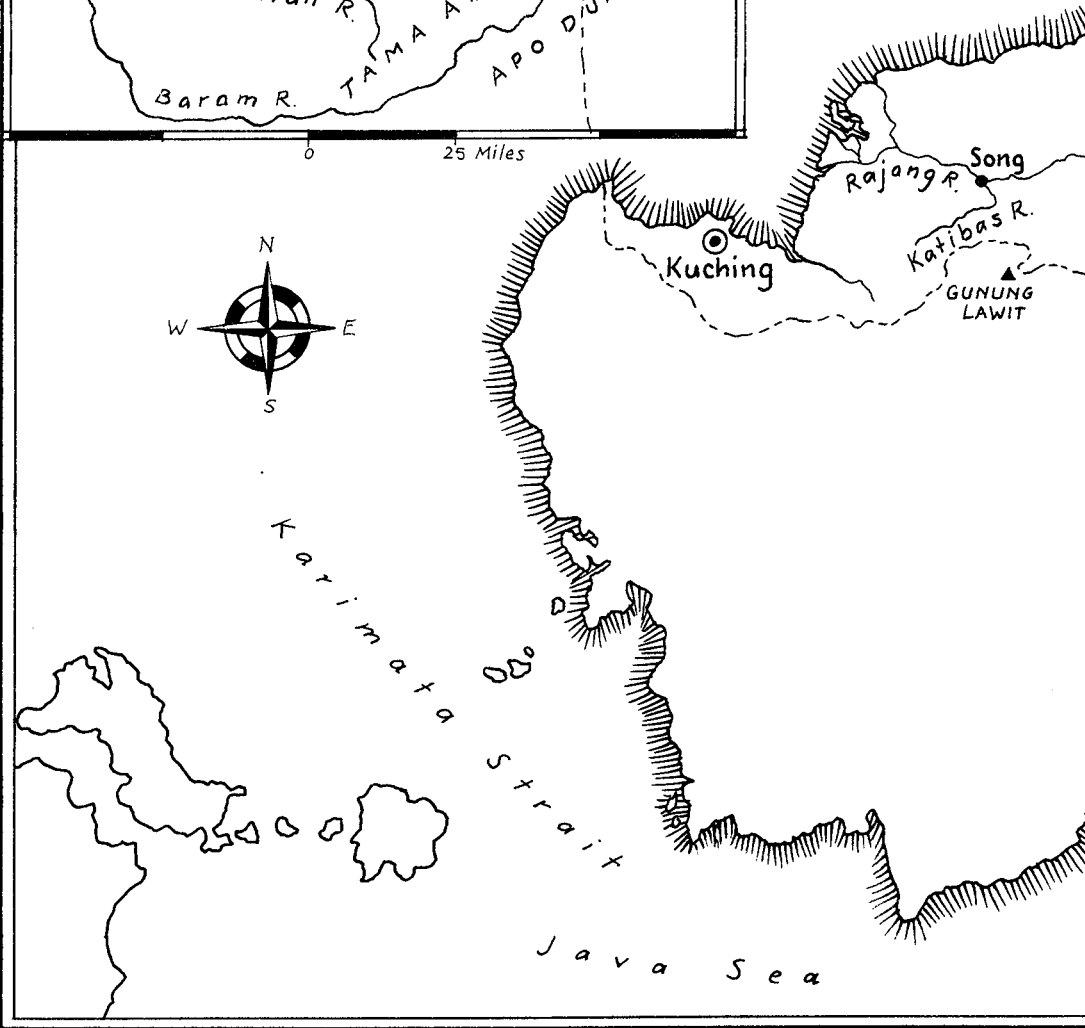
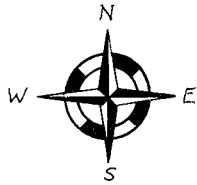
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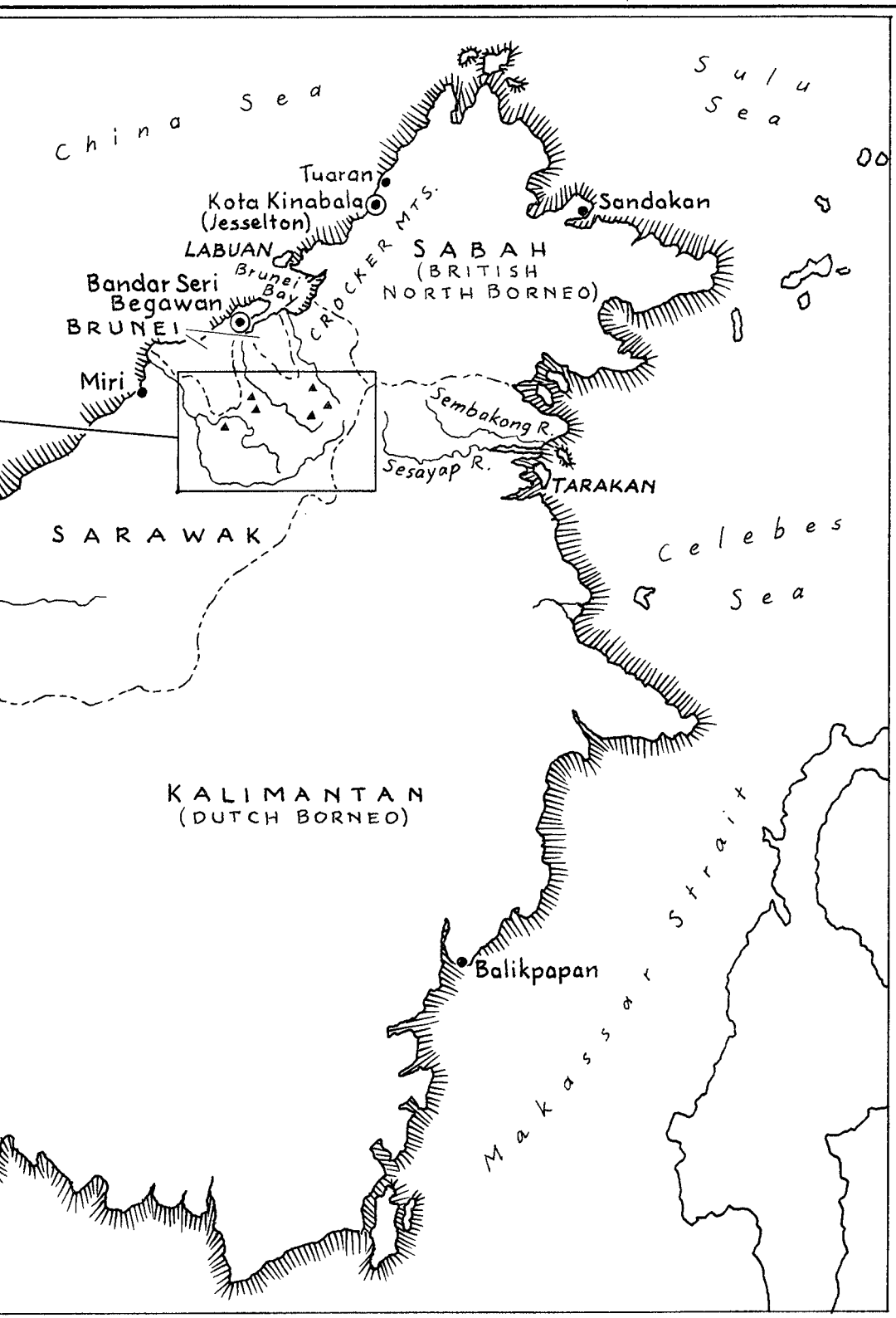


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Author's Note

THIS BOOK CAPTURES a number of the major splits in my personality. It is about a bunch of dirtbag climbers traveling through a remote and little understood land. It is also the story of one of the more colorful personalities to ever inhabit that land, and the people who welcomed him there. It is an adventure-travel story and a history book. However, true scholars and avid history buffs may be bothered with the way the history is told, and my approach to the subject deserves some attention.

My principal source of information on the Semut Campaign and the operations following Flight 200 was Tom Harrison's biographical account of that time. His book, *World Within*, is a wonderful read for both historians and armchair travelers. I also used the memoirs of Sgt. Keith Barrie, who was one of the seven original men to drop into the Kelabit Highlands with Major Harrison (at the time of this writing he was one of three men of the group still alive and the only one I managed to track down). Mr. Barrie was assigned to a post west of the Highlands and thus did not serve the entire campaign with Harrison, so he gave a different perspective on the mission and a different window into Harrison as a character. He had originally written his own memoirs for publication, but for reasons unbeknownst to me that has not happened. He passed them on without ever meeting me, and for that I am grateful. Just before I finished this manuscript,

another book by Judith Heimann (see bibliography) came out, and it too served as a reference for much of the WWII information. Additional sources were the conversations I had with the Kelabit, Iban, Berewan, and other tribesmen who fought the war. When I first began speaking with them I did not intend to write a book on their experiences, so I never took down their names or made any notes. Much of the history that unfolds in *All Elevations Unknown* comes from their recollections and stories. To say the least, I owe a great deal to all of these men. The WWII history of Borneo is their story, not mine, and I appreciate their help. To them I say, I only wish I could give all of you the personal credit you deserve.

I was not there in 1945, but I have tried to recreate how it all took place by gathering together various pieces of military information, the locations of various battles, information on the soldiers fighting the battles, and the approach these countries took to the war. An absolutely perfect rendition of this history does not, as far as I know, exist. Nevertheless, I wrote this book from a very intimate perspective. After reading their accounts, talking with men who were there, and getting as much of a feel as I could for the personalities involved, I created dialogue. The dialogue is fictional. No one knows exactly what Harrison said to the man working the radio on May 1, 1945, at 10:00 A.M., but based upon the way the war was fought, the way these men seemed to conduct themselves, and the way these events transpired, I have made an educated guess. And obviously, I have guessed at people's thoughts and motivations as well. Although it is not pure history, it comes close. Similarly, if I could have ascertained the details of who had done what, I would have given them credit by name. For the most part that particular information is lost in time. Nevertheless, the battles, the dates, and the major events that transpired are not made up. As best as I can figure, this is how it all happened, though the people involved might have talked of it differently or gone about it in a slightly different manner.

Finally, I should point out that I changed the names of a few people. Their real names aren't necessary and it may be that they would not want the fame that comes with being mentioned in a book.

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PROLOGUE

March 25, 1945

AMAT WAS RETRIEVING HIS BUFFALO from the paddy when he heard again, in the far distance, the sound. The sky was clearing for the first time in days, but Amat hadn't noticed until he'd looked to the sound. This same noise, a deep hum like the long bellow of a buffalo, had come from the clouds on many of the previous days, and numerous tribesmen had heard it, but no one in the longhouse could determine the source. Just as before, the sound was heard for a short while, then it disappeared. Amat shook his head at the strangeness of it, then went on about his work.

Amat's only buffalo had wallowed in the deepest part of the old and unused rice paddy, and as usual it had gotten stuck. The animal didn't need much of a tug to come free as it was capable of getting out of the mud on its own power, but without Amat's prodding it would sit there for no telling how long. For Amat the water buffalo was an integral part of life. When the buffalo wasn't pulling a plow, it tilled the soil, aerated the ground with its hooves, and of course spread around lots of fertilizer. Amat and the other members of his tribe, the Kelabit, could live without buffalo, but it would be a much harder life, with a lot more work and not nearly as much rice. The behavior of the buffalo, stupid and lazy, was a nuisance, but working with these animals was as necessary a part of life as planting and harvesting.

It had rained the previous night, and for many days before, so the paddy dikes were soggy and slippery. Amat balanced on a firm spot and pulled on the buffalo's leash, a thick rattan cord that ran across the muddy water and through the buffalo's nose, but the animal just craned its head a bit and let out a loud snort. Amat knew from experience that the buffalo didn't want to come all the way across the paddy, so he moved to the other side, closer to the animal and into the vines and bamboo that marked the edge of cultivated land and the beginning of the forest. He tugged again at the leash, its rough texture giving him a good grip despite the mud and slime. The buffalo let out a bellow, then made a few more grunts and took a few straining steps toward the edge of the paddy. Water and mud streamed off the animal's round gut, and Amat could see that a few leeches had found a nice breakfast on its neck. In a few more pulls the animal would be out of the paddy and they could get down to the planned task of the day.

At just over six feet tall, Amat was average sized for a Kelabit, and like the rest of his tribe a lifetime of hunting in the forest and working as a farmer had given him a powerful physique. His bronze skin sat tightly against a muscular frame as he tugged at the animal, and his toes dug into the paddy dike to keep him from tumbling into the muddy water.

For weeks Amat had been wanting to plant in the older paddy, but there just hadn't been time. He and his wife had been harvesting rice from their other two paddies and helping other families from the longhouse do the same. With that harvest complete, the time had come to close one of those paddies and start work in this one, but it would take a while to get it ready for planting.

Amat pulled the buffalo out of the water and then looked out over the paddy, contemplating where to begin. This paddy had produced rice before, but when the rice grew weak and produced a smaller yield, he had switched to the second paddy. Growing rice had always been done this way by the Kelabit. His father, his grandfather, and everyone before had moved from paddy to paddy, keeping the buffalo in the unused areas while letting freshwater from the

mountains circulate through the mud. Somehow, in a way that Amat never truly understood, rotating the crops between paddies kept the rice yield high. If they didn't move from paddy to paddy, the rice would eventually cease growing altogether. His family was very fortunate as they had three paddies; he could keep two working and leave one for the buffalo, and always have a good supply of rice. It was a good system, and far more efficient than that of the other tribes who lived below the Kelabit Highlands. He had heard that each year they were forced to clear a new section of jungle to create a new paddy. That was an enormous amount of work, and none of the Kelabit envied their lives.

Amat was about to flick a leech from the stupid animal's neck when he heard the sound again. This was very odd. The Kelabit people had been hearing it for days, but never twice in one morning. Now, in just a short while, the sound had returned. It started out near Batu Lawi, the mountain that watched over all the Kelabit people and kept them safe from the fire god, Gunung Api, and the powerful lowland tribes like the Iban. Perhaps Batu Lawi was angry, or perhaps, being a sentinel for the Highlands, it was trying to warn the Kelabit of some impending danger. This strange sound had been the main topic of conversation during evening meals; the entire longhouse, the building that served as a home and gathering center for his tribe, had been chatting about it, and there was some concern as to what could make such a noise. The Tuai Rumah, the chief of all the longhouses, had been consulted on the matter. He too had heard it, but had no answers. To be on the safe side, the heavy mahogany log ladders into the longhouses had been pulled up in the evenings, and all the men had carried their blowguns and quivers of poison darts to work each day. There had been some discussion that the noise was coming from angry spirits, so each man also carried a piece of white cloth, as the pure color would tell the spirits that the tribe meant no harm. Now, for the fourth day, the noise had returned, and as on previous days it quickly grew louder. It was a deep droning, very low, like the bellow of a large male buffalo but with a rhythm like the hiss of cicadae. Amat turned toward the sound, toward the

rising sun and Gunung Murud, the largest mountain in the Highlands. The humming grew steadily louder, much louder than the days before, but still he could see nothing but the silver and gray of the morning clouds. Before, the loudest sound from the sky came from the flapping wings of a hornbill, but that was nothing compared to this hum. It overwhelmed all other noises.

Amat stared intently at the sky as the sound approached him, moving over the ridge where the Ukat begins flowing, and toward Pa Main, the largest longhouse on the Plain of Bah. It seemed to pass right above him, louder than anything he'd ever heard, and then the sound moved out toward the middle of the plain. Suddenly it was there, emerging from a break in the clouds and plainly visible against the pale blue sky—an enormous bird, much bigger than a great hornbill, flying very fast without flapping its wings. The bird made a big arc, turned, changed direction, and flew straight back toward Amat. He thought to run, but where could he go to get away from such a beast? He stood his ground and watched closely, knowing he would have to relate everything he saw to the people of the longhouse and the *penghulu*. Then the bird dropped something. It fell rapidly but suddenly grew very large, with a shape similar to that of the seedpods from the biggest trees, and slowed in its descent. Three more objects quickly dropped and changed to a similar shape. The bird then flew into the clouds as the seedlike things it had dropped slowly descended to the ground.

Amat let go of the water buffalo's leash, picked up his blowgun, and began trotting toward Pa Main. Not only was he eager to tell the tribe that he had seen the source of the sound, but the dropped object could be very dangerous for his people. He ran fast along the paddy dike, always watching a few feet in front to be sure no cobras lay basking on the trail, but also feeling in his quiver bottle to make sure that plenty of darts were available. Though he also carried a white cloth to alert the spirits that he meant no harm, he wanted a full supply of blowgun darts handy in case this thing didn't accept the peace offering.

Amat arrived back at the longhouse to find the tribe gathering in

front of the main door. The *penghulu* stood on the veranda and shouted down to Amat to stay at the longhouse and not return to the area where the objects had fallen. Three Kelabit men had already been sent and they would soon report back on what they had found.

It would be a long time before Amat planted rice in the old paddy again.

CHAPTER 1

Fall 1998

FOR SOME REASON which I will never bother to ascertain, European phones make different noises when you call them compared to American phones. I sat in my office and listened as bleeps and honks came over the Atlantic in pairs, waiting for my German friend Volker to pick up his end. It was seven o'clock in the evening at my home in Wyoming, but some ungodly hour in Germany, so Volk was taking a while to answer. I had important news that couldn't wait, and since he is a doctor he would have to answer the phone. For all he knew I might be a sick person needing a bleeding or something. Suddenly the honks stopped.

"What?" He said in a startled tone.

"You can't answer the phone that way," I replied. "How do you know I don't have a bratwurst stuck in my larynx or something?"

"I know because if this were a medical emergency, my handy would be ringing." He paused long enough for me to remember that a "handy" is what people in civilized countries call a cellular phone. "Only you call me at three A.M. on this number."

"Well, you should be more polite," I responded. "Project Misty Mountain has just cleared its biggest hurdle."

"You found *The Tower*?"

"Yes I did," I replied. "Now suck up to me for a bit or I won't tell you where the thing is."

Volker Schoeffl and I had originally met while on independent climbing trips to the coastal rock spires of Pha Nga Bay in southern Thailand. Volker had been there a month before my climbing partner, Mark Newcomb, and I arrived. He had established a number of climbs on the steep limestone pinnacles with his brother Gerd and another German mountaineer named Frank Dicker, but had just sent Gerd home with a medical emergency. While they were climbing a three-hundred-foot vertical wall on a remote island, a small stalactite had detached seventy feet above Gerd and speared him through the kneecap. Volker was only in his first year of medical school, but even Germans have the education to realize that a twelve-pound chunk of limestone through the femur is a bit of a handicap, so he shipped Gerd off to be pieced back together, minus the extra geology, in Frankfurt. Mark and I stumbled onto him and Frank just days afterward, and we all wound up climbing together for the next few weeks. Meanwhile, orthopedic surgeons, clean linen, and probably a geologist helped Gerd to recover nicely, and I was later introduced to him while visiting Volk in Germany. The three of us have since traveled across the US and Europe, through South Africa, Zimbabwe, Laos, and the Philippines, all in a quest for good rock climbing in places that were exotic and unexplored by most of the world's climbers. Our shared passion for the sport of rock climbing, and the exploration of countries whose names we can't correctly spell, had made the late-night phone calls excusable, if not expected.

"So where is the mountain?" Volk was now decidedly more energetic. He went on, "Wait, are you still in Malaysia?"

"No, I'm back in Wyoming," I said. "Now go get a map." He dropped the phone and went off searching. I could hear this and that being thrown around as he cursed in German, and it occurred to me how amazing it was that Volker could slip back and forth between languages. He spoke English fluently, which was a good thing since my German was barely sufficient for ordering a beer. When we were off traveling together he made a constant game of correcting me in my mother tongue. It is embarrassing to have a foreigner correct you

in your own language, but it was something I had to get used to when socializing with an overachieving German.

Volker had been somewhat of a child prodigy on the twelve-string guitar, and he and Gerd, who was a pianist, used to entertain at parties by playing their instruments in classical duets. They were eleven and nine years old at the time. Volker gave up the guitar but went on to medical school and got his degree, with honors, in the standard amount of time. The difference between him and his peers was that during his Western education he spent a year studying in Sri Lanka and China, surviving a nasty civil war and a bout with malaria and getting a degree in the Eastern art of acupuncture. He simultaneously received his doctorate in medicine in Germany, then went on to do an internship in an emergency room in Johannesburg, South Africa. These days he is a doctor at a sports-medicine clinic in Bavaria, nationally ranked in sport climbing, and an odd glint in many a beautiful woman's eye.

"I found a map of Malaysia and Borneo," he said when he returned to the phone, "but it's not very detailed."

"Then you won't find our mountain on there," I said. "To be honest, I haven't been able to locate it on any map yet, but I'm pretty sure I know where it is. Just look for Brunei, then look south to the Malaysian border. Right there is the Mulu region, where Gunung Benerat is. Just south of that, on the Indonesian border, are the Kelabit Highlands. The peak is one of the higher elevation points somewhere in there."

"How do you know?" he asked. "And how big is it?" He was mumbling in a way that told me he was actually focusing on the map.

"No two maps give the same altitude, but it's big enough that the Kelabit, the locals, have legends about it," I replied. We knew from experience that this was a good sign. Every major geologic anomaly, from Devils Tower in Wyoming to Mount Everest in Tibet, is the focus of legend by its local inhabitants. Volker and I had discussed this fact on numerous trips and eventually decided that there was a general mountaineering rule that could be applied: anything

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