

OPERATION OVERBITE

By Tom Jackson

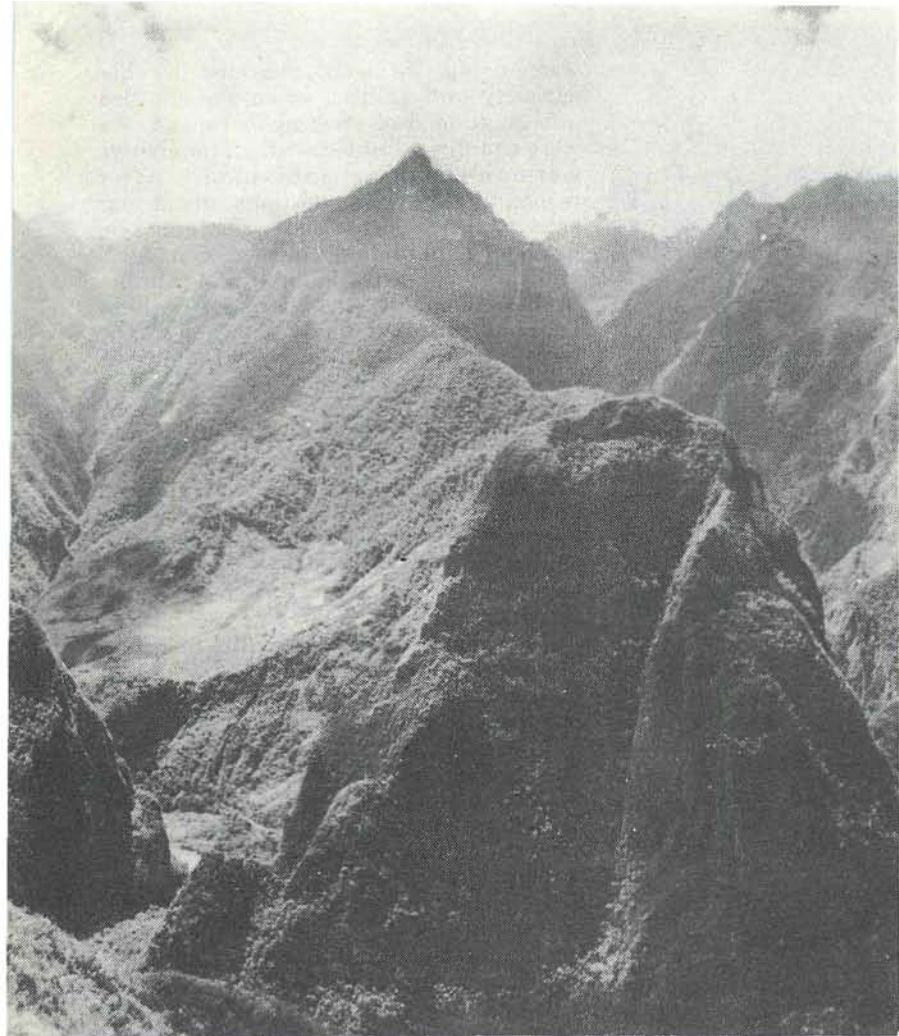
THE STORY of the creation and work of the South American Explorers Club's Commission OVERBITE (Our Very Energetic Resolve to Beautify the Inca Trail Environs).

Hey, Ivan," I shouted, "How about a Polish tuna fish can?"

Some people collect postage stamps, others rare coins, string, powerline insulators. Ivan is a student of international garbology. A visitor to Cuzco may view a small fraction of Ivan's collection by dropping by the *Instituto Nacional de Cultura* (INC) where, littering the desk of Jorge Flores, there is on permanent display the following treasures:

- 1 French cognac bottle (from the ruins Sayakmarka)
 - 1 Tuna fish can (Poland)
 - 1 Tuna fish can (Italy)
 - 3 Japanese tins (original contents unknown)
 - 1 French pate de foie gras (conveniently packed in toothpaste tube-like container)
 - 4 Freeze-dried food envelopes (Germany)
 - 1 Super-8 film box (Switzerland)
- And much more. . .

How came Ivan by this unique collection? Well, it all started about two years ago at the South American Explorers Club in Lima. Members, in increasing numbers, began appearing at 146 Avenida Portugal and instead of regaling us with the usual raptures about the 33-kilometers of spectacular scenery, the breath-taking



South America, and pursues many other fine aims that can be found by perusing the inside front cover of the South American Explorer, the club's publication.

Thus it came to pass that the leading lights of both the South American Explorers Club and the Club Andino Peruano sat down one evening to address themselves to the challenge and produced a document in which the collective leadership of both organizations humbly sought permission to clean up the Inca Trail while clearly stating that such an act would entail no expense on the part of the Peruvian government whatsoever. This was submitted to the appropriate authorities. We had planted a seed.

Years passed. Rumor of the proposed project came to the attention of Jorge Flores, Director of the INC in Cuzco. Jorge enthusiastically embraced the idea, even to the extent of extending an invitation to both clubs to get on with the business.

One drab morning in early May, 1980, Mark Mardon, Assistant Manager of the South American Explorers Club and an environmentalist from the School of International Training in Brattleboro, Vermont, Dr. Ivan Augsburg, Director of the Peruvian-North American Cultural Institute in Cuzco, and I, manager of the Lima headquarters of the South American Explorers Club, jumped off the train at Km88 and immediately began collecting refuse.

Now, members of the South American Explorers Club generally, and its stalwart functionaries in particular, always try to

trail over high passes through cloud forest, the wondrous subtropical vegetation, the swooning odes to the over-90 species of orchid, the Inca fortresses emerging through the mists, we now heard less inspiring comments.

"Bloody pig sty," said a Brit.

"Schweinerei," pronounced an otherwise unemotional German couple.

"Merde!" announced a French girl with Gallic literalness.

"Ain't fit fur hawgs. . ." drawled a Texan.

"Un-Swiss," said a Swiss woman.

Our world-wide correspondence reflected a similar shift in sentiment. To quote one representative remark among many, a New Zealand tour guide wrote to say: "For over ten years I have taken trekking groups to many parts of the world, but never in all my experience have I seen such a disgusting mess of rubbish and human waste as I did on those two days on the Inca Trail."

Such observations, both verbal and written, betokened a degree of dissatisfaction we could not ignore.

The South American Explorers Club, we were aware, is, above all, a non-profit organization dedicated to advancing the scientific and spiritual exploration of

ABOVE: Machu Picchu — the goal of hikers who walk the Inca Trail. BELOW: Cheerful author prepares to set out on Mission OVERBITE.





Ivan prepares to sort out the tin cans and burn the rest of the garbage.

maintain a low profile, and ever adverse to tooting our own horns, in no way embarked upon this task with any thought of engendering praise or attracting vulgar publicity. Yet, after all, we were, after all, doing something. . . ah. . . noble and good, and certainly nothing which could or should arouse derision or mockery on the part of others.

This feeling of tempered modesty, therefore, cast an aura of innocent cheer over our work as we stuffed rusty, deformed cans, used toilet paper and other unspeakable things into large sacks. And when approached by a young Indian woman wanting to know what the gringos

were doing we were charmed by her curiosity and uplifted when she shuffled off, giggling and shaking her head. We were equally delighted with an inquisitive German-speaking individual. After responding to his questions about our activity that we were picking up garbage, he nodded approvingly, barked "Gutidea," and airily flipped a banana peel into the bushes. Of course, we were happy for him. Less patient and forbearing people might have stuffed it down his throat and rammed a . . . but no such idea occurred to us.

Contentedly persevering in our rewarding task, we forged ahead carrying ten plastic grain sacks (50-kilo capacity) and a pick and shovel supplied by William Leonard in Cuzco. We had fashioned pointed sticks to spear the litter and tied bags upon our backs to receive the skewered midden.

That night we made a bonfire fueled by the trash of many lands and, close to nature, listened to the notes of Mark's flute reverberate off the darkened hills.

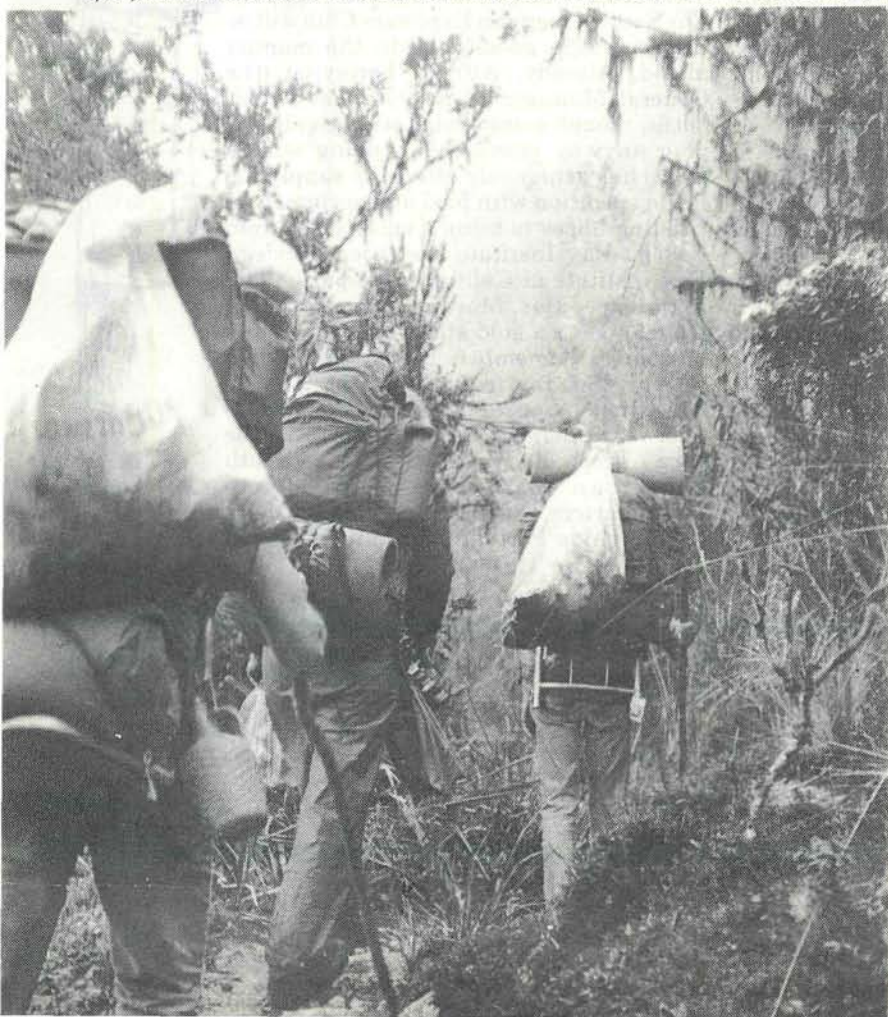
The trials that faced us in the days ahead could only be appreciated by those who have worked long and hard for the benefit of their fellow man. I will not dwell upon the dampness that made it so difficult to burn the mountains of accumulated litter. Nor will I emphasize overlong the vast quantities of foil and cans that defied the flames. But, certainly a few words are in order concerning the latrines.

It will have been noted earlier that we came equipped with pick and shovel, essential gear for the construction of pit latrines which we planned to dig at discrete, but convenient spots along the trail. It seems, however, that our commendable project to construct suitable commodes had been anticipated, however inadequately, by the INC, and we only wish we could report that the receptacles that we found built for this purpose were truly in harmony with nature. Alas, we must reveal that one such W.C. was illadvisedly situated above a sparkling stream, lamentably the sole water source for the Phuyupatamarca area, a spring, moreover, which may well be, even now, teeming with cholera, typhoid and who knows what other dread diseases lying in wait. And alack, the two other latrines were not wholly satisfactory either.

Our industry at beautifying the trail received added impetus on the fourth day when Cristina Kessler-Nobel joined our group. Cristina, an anthropologist and cofounder of both the Bodega Bay Institute and Marin Adventures in California, had been delayed in Lima, but now, our task force complete, we accumulated garbage in what can only be termed as industrial quantities. In fact, we bagged more offal



ABOVE: 50% of the trash came from provisions bought in Peru; of the other half, 75% bore labels in German, another eighth was French; and the rest — roughly equal parts from the U.S., Britain, Italy, Denmark, Spain and Ecuador. BELOW: Contentedly persevering in our rewarding task.



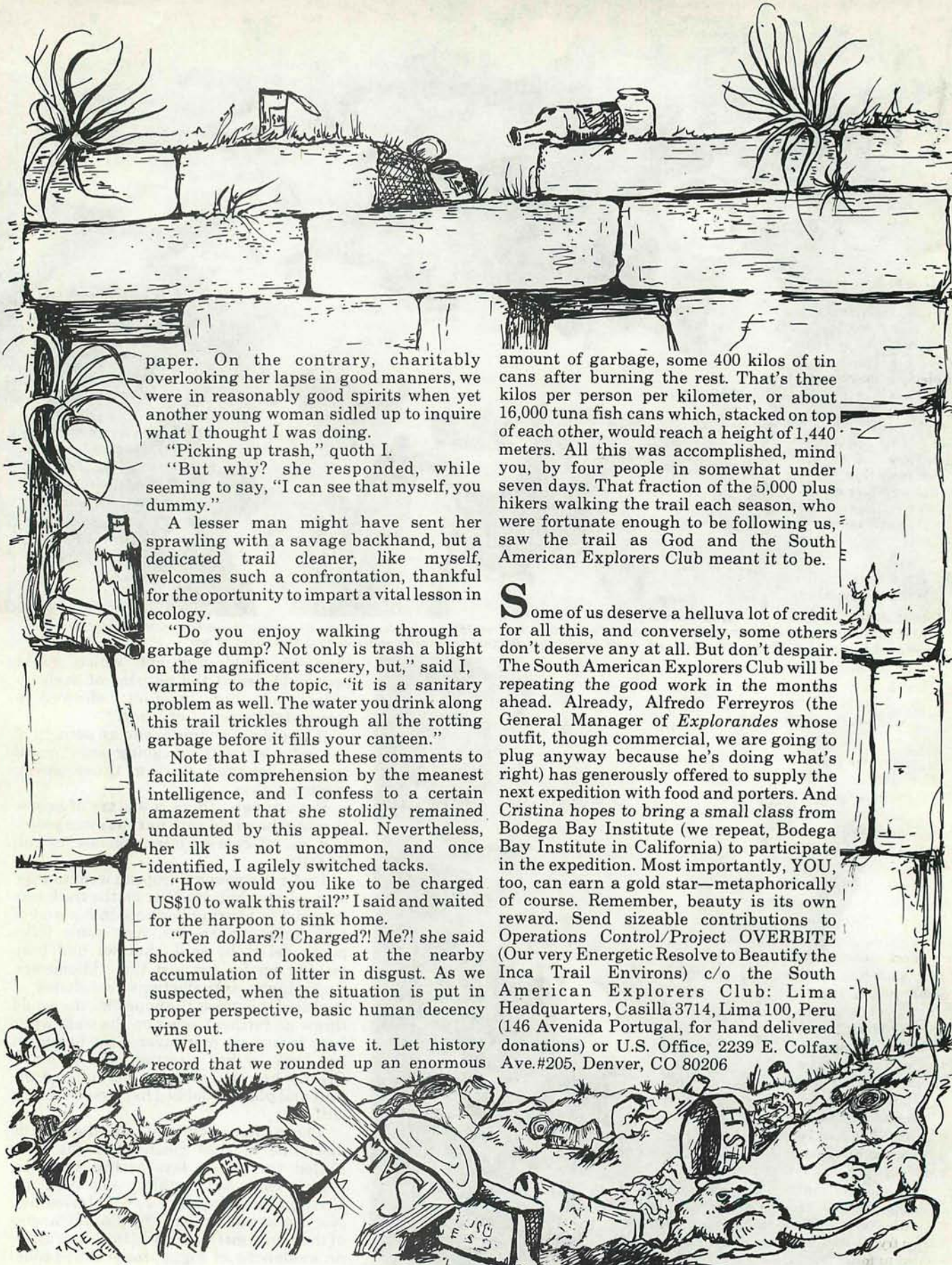
than we could drag out, which might appear to defeat the purpose of such an enterprise, but in fact, showed a tremendous amount of heart.

It would not be fair to end an account of our odyssey without going into moral lessons learned during those seven inspiring days.

Put strongly, there is a class of people sharing the world with us that some people (not us, of course) might choose to call **SLOBS**.

I refer to a young European woman who, as we drew abreast of her on the trail, was engaged in blowing her nose into a wad of pink toilet paper—the very same toilet paper, let it be said, that we had been picking up for the last three kilometers. Preliminary introductions concluded, I ventured to express the hope that she would throw no further tissues on the trail, while Ivan invitingly maneuvered the bag upon his back in her direction. To no avail. Clearly her own woman, she ignored the hint and placidly lobbed her tissue over the cliff.

Those less schooled in the gentle discipline of trail cleaning might have hurled the young lass arcing after her calling card, but certainly not Ivan nor Cristina, nor Mark nor I. We blessed her. Nor did we succumb to any playful fancies of the young girl horribly suffocating under an avalanche of soggy, rose-colored toilet



paper. On the contrary, charitably overlooking her lapse in good manners, we were in reasonably good spirits when yet another young woman sidled up to inquire what I thought I was doing.

"Picking up trash," quoth I.

"But why?" she responded, while seeming to say, "I can see that myself, you dummy."

A lesser man might have sent her sprawling with a savage backhand, but a dedicated trail cleaner, like myself, welcomes such a confrontation, thankful for the opportunity to impart a vital lesson in ecology.

"Do you enjoy walking through a garbage dump? Not only is trash a blight on the magnificent scenery, but," said I, warming to the topic, "it is a sanitary problem as well. The water you drink along this trail trickles through all the rotting garbage before it fills your canteen."

Note that I phrased these comments to facilitate comprehension by the meanest intelligence, and I confess to a certain amazement that she stolidly remained undaunted by this appeal. Nevertheless, her ilk is not uncommon, and once identified, I agilely switched tacks.

"How would you like to be charged US\$10 to walk this trail?" I said and waited for the harpoon to sink home.

"Ten dollars?! Charged?! Me?! she said shocked and looked at the nearby accumulation of litter in disgust. As we suspected, when the situation is put in proper perspective, basic human decency wins out.

Well, there you have it. Let history record that we rounded up an enormous

amount of garbage, some 400 kilos of tin cans after burning the rest. That's three kilos per person per kilometer, or about 16,000 tuna fish cans which, stacked on top of each other, would reach a height of 1,440 meters. All this was accomplished, mind you, by four people in somewhat under seven days. That fraction of the 5,000 plus hikers walking the trail each season, who were fortunate enough to be following us, saw the trail as God and the South American Explorers Club meant it to be.

Some of us deserve a helluva lot of credit for all this, and conversely, some others don't deserve any at all. But don't despair. The South American Explorers Club will be repeating the good work in the months ahead. Already, Alfredo Ferreyros (the General Manager of *Explorandes* whose outfit, though commercial, we are going to plug anyway because he's doing what's right) has generously offered to supply the next expedition with food and porters. And Cristina hopes to bring a small class from Bodega Bay Institute (we repeat, Bodega Bay Institute in California) to participate in the expedition. Most importantly, YOU, too, can earn a gold star—metaphorically of course. Remember, beauty is its own reward. Send sizeable contributions to Operations Control/Project OVERBITE (Our very Energetic Resolve to Beautify the Inca Trail Environs) c/o the South American Explorers Club: Lima Headquarters, Casilla 3714, Lima 100, Peru (146 Avenida Portugal, for hand delivered donations) or U.S. Office, 2239 E. Colfax Ave. #205, Denver, CO 80206

