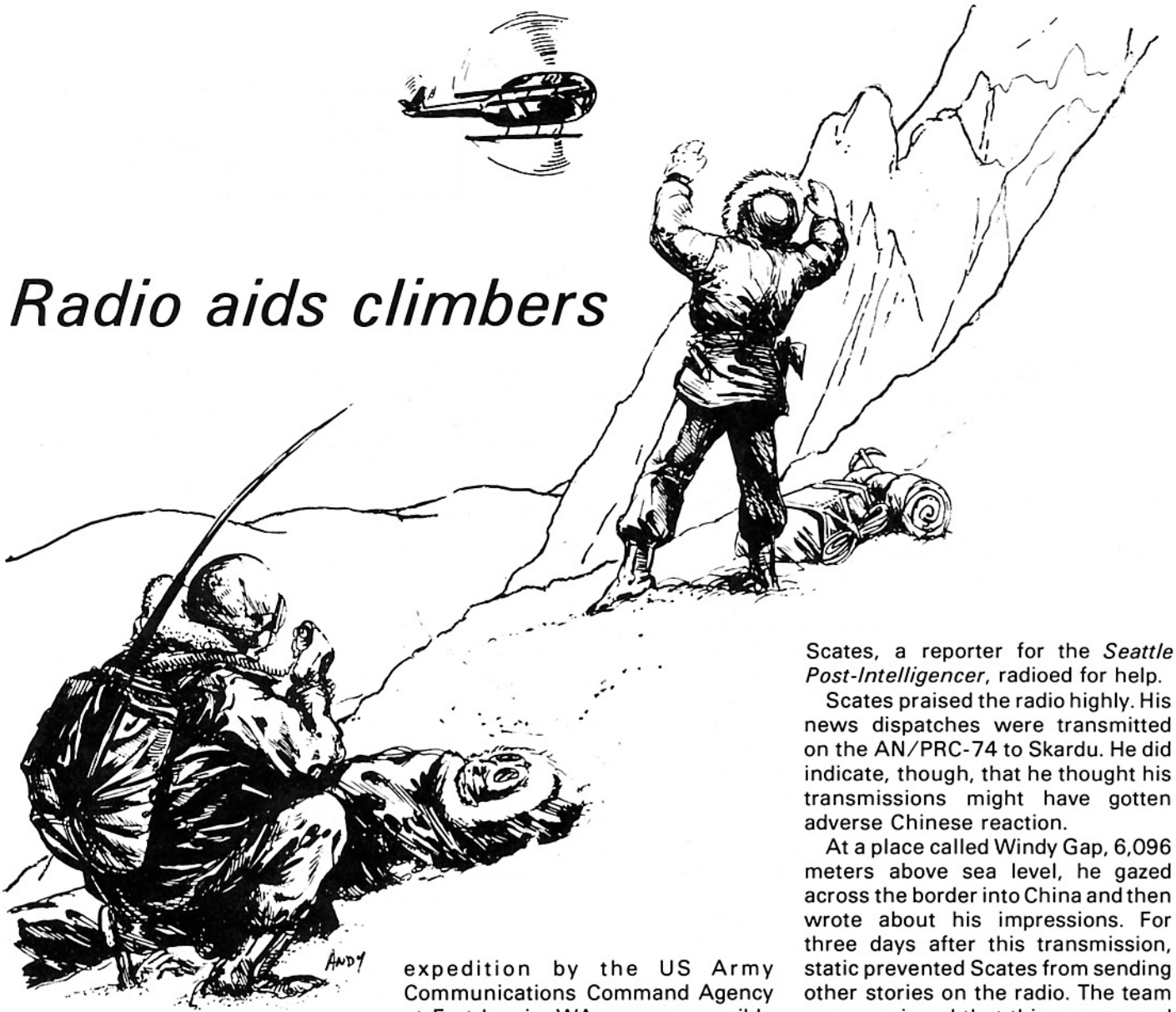
Radio aids climbers



by SP4 Brian Mellstead and
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"It did a helluva job for us," said James Whitaker, leader of the American expedition that climbed the second highest mountain in the world.

"It" is the Army's AN/PRC-74 (AM back-pack) radio, which was used by the climbers on their trek up Pakistan's K^2 (also known as Godwin Austen or Dapsang), a mountain towering some 8,600 meters above Kashmir.

The back-pack radio, several of which were made available for the expedition by the US Army Communications Command Agency at Fort Lewis, WA, was responsible for the success of two emergency evacuations of expedition members.

One member, Jim Wickwire, was suffering from pleurisy and damaged vocal cords after spending a night on the mountain without supplemental oxygen. With the help of the AN/PRC-74, a helicopter rescue was accomplished in "an incredibly short period of time," Whitaker said. Without it, a runner would have had to push his way 240 kilometers to Skardu, Pakistan, to request assistance. The delay might have been a fatal one for Wickwire.

During the first days of the trip, another of the American climbers had to be rescued. The climber fell down a cliff at the 4,264-meter level and another helicopter evacuation was needed. In this case, Shelby Scates, a reporter for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, radioed for help.

Scates praised the radio highly. His news dispatches were transmitted on the AN/PRC-74 to Skardu. He did indicate, though, that he thought his transmissions might have gotten adverse Chinese reaction.

At a place called Windy Gap, 6,096 meters above sea level, he gazed across the border into China and then wrote about his impressions. For three days after this transmission, static prevented Scates from sending other stories on the radio. The team was convinced that this was caused by electronic jamming.

Whitaker said the team was repeatedly surprised by how well the military radios worked. With one radio at the 4,877-meter level at the base camp and another at 5,486 meters at Camp 1, the transmitted signals climbed over the 7,925-meter high Karakoram Ridge and traveled 240 kilometers to Skardu and the outside world.

Members of the K^2 expedition were grateful to SSG Lee V. Whelch of the 58th Signal Battalion for the lessons he gave them to use the PRC-74.

"He didn't always agree with the manual," Scates commented. "But his tremendous experience in the field really helped us do the job when the going got rough. Without his help, it would never have worked."