

# Climbing

**Middendorf**

on A5  
and  
Grade VII

**Hit the jackpot:**  
new Vegas limestone

**John Long's**  
hall of shame

Display until August 1



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No. 146 August 1 - September 15, 1994

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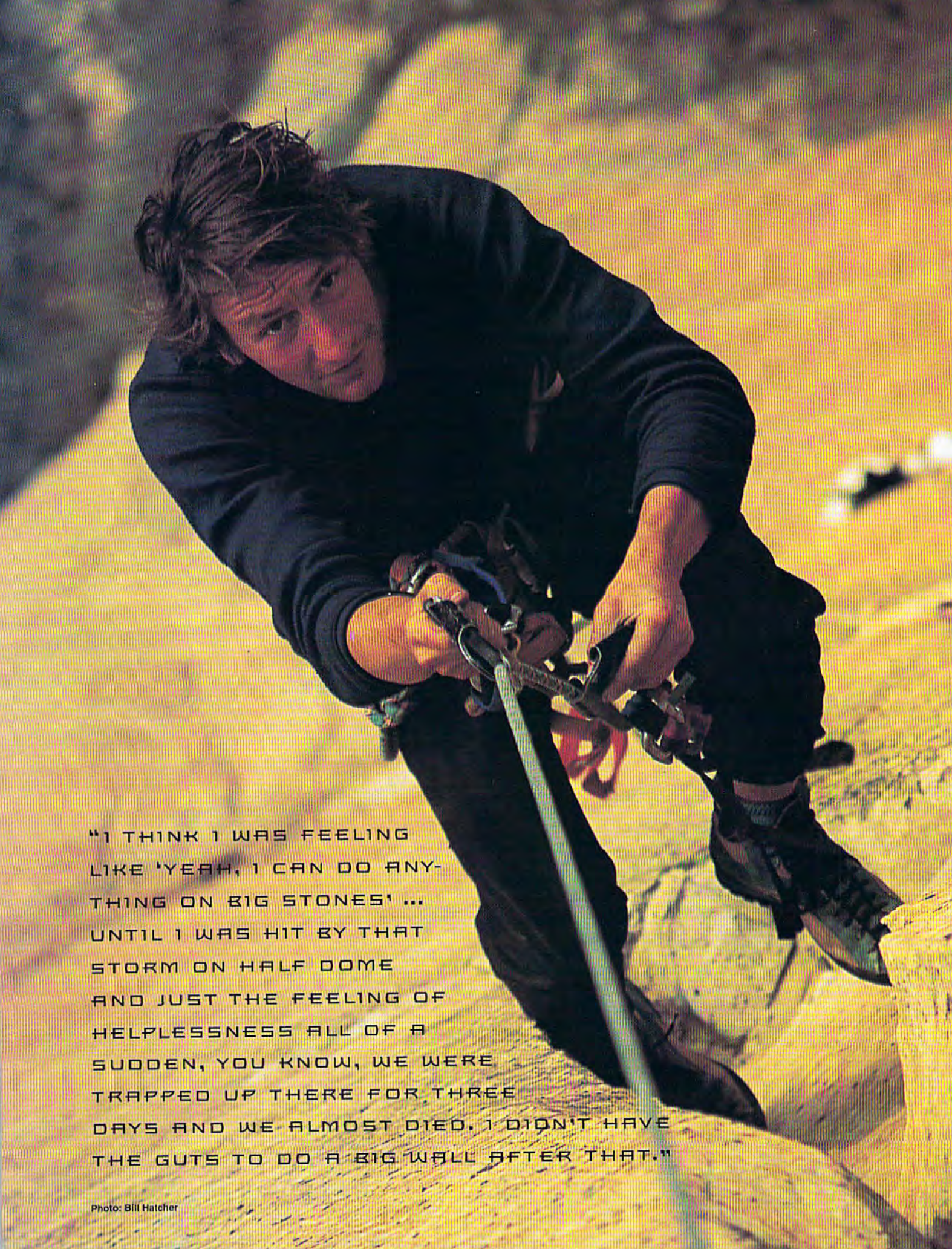
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Cover: Jeff Jackson on pitch five, *The Shining Path* (V 5.12+), El Potrero Chico, Mexico.  
Photo: Kurt Smith

Contents: John Middendorf in his trademark pose, on the summit of Cerro Torre, Patagonia.  
Photo: Conrad Anker



"I THINK I WAS FEELING LIKE 'YEAH, I CAN DO ANYTHING ON BIG STONES' ... UNTIL I WAS HIT BY THAT STORM ON HALF DOME AND JUST THE FEELING OF HELPLESSNESS ALL OF A SUDDEN, YOU KNOW, WE WERE TRAPPED UP THERE FOR THREE DAYS AND WE ALMOST DIED. I DIDN'T HAVE THE GUTS TO DO A BIG WALL AFTER THAT."

Photo: Bill Hatcher

A TRIP WITH BIG-WALL MASTER JOHN MIDDENDORF

# HAMMER TIME

BY LISA MORGAN

WITH A LIFE OF ADVENTURE HOLDING A LOADED GUN TO HIS LONGEVITY, JOHN MIDDENDORF DECIDED TO PLAY IT SAFE — HE SWITCHED TO CAMEL FILTERS. HE EVEN TRADED IN THE LIVER-HARDENING OLD ENGLISH BOO OF HIS YOSEMITE DAYS FOR WATERY OLD MILWAUKEE. BUT JOHN HASN'T ALWAYS BEEN SO HEALTHY. A BIZARRE BLEND OF TIMOTHY LEARY AND ROYAL ROBBINS, HE HAS ALWAYS TESTED THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT IS POSSIBLE, MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY. HE SOLOED VALLEY FREE CLIMBS, AND THEN LEFT HIS

VICES BEHIND TO ATTEMPT THE IMPOSSIBLE ON THE GREAT TRANGO TOWER. HE STAYED UP FOR DAYS AT A TIME AND FASTED FOR NEARLY A WEEK JUST TO SEE WHAT IT WAS LIKE.

HE CALMLY EXPLAINS THESE TESTS WHILE HIS ARM IS OUT-

**Middendorf on the first ascent of *Tricks of the Tramp* (V 5.10 A2), Issac, Zion, Utah (far left); and in Pakistan (left).**



Photo: Ace Kvale

stretched and his fingers are shoved in a narrow, closing sandstone crack as he slowly lifts his feet off the ground. "I'm trying to increase my pain threshold," he says, grinning as if it were a joke, but his scrunched right hand is weighted by 175 pounds (176 if you count the warm can of beer and half-burned cigarette he's casually holding in his left hand). As he lowers his bare feet to the warm Zion sand his childish smirk reveals teeth stained from years of biding his time on big walls with unfiltered Camels.

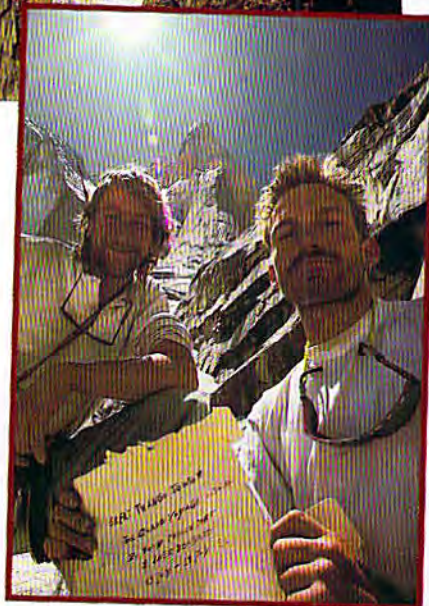
Willing to take risks with a sense of detached experimentation, Middendorf has struggled, hammered, and hooked his way up tens of thousands of feet of the most difficult uncharted vertical in the country. And he's one of the few people to take these skills to the Himalaya — to a face half again the size of El Cap, at 20,000 feet. His first ascents include the *Atlantic Ocean Wall* (VI 5.10 A5) El Capitan; *Kali Yuga* (VI 5.10 A4+) northwest face of Half Dome; *Autobahn* (V 5.11+) southwest face of Half Dome; *Radiator* (VI 5.10 A4) Abraham, Zion; and *The Grand Voyage* (VII 5.10+ A4+) Great Trango Tower, Pakistan.

"He's like the bionic man," says his climbing partner Jeff Hollenbaugh. "No matter what he does to his body, he always rises to the occasion."

Despite his well-known achievements in the climbing world, Middendorf will never grace a box of Wheaties. He may slip his lanky figure into sporty Verve pants for the desert cracks, but no doubt he'll also be wearing his rust-colored Patagonia jacket complete with cigarette burns. His brown hair will have that post-bivy look, with a few dusty strands hanging across his eyes pointing to the innocent, honest grin that bursts out of his worn face. Middendorf looks his age, 34, but his expression wears the warmth and



**The Grand Voyage: Great Trango Tower, Pakistan (above); Middendorf and Bongard after the climb (right); and on the route (opposite).**



understanding of an elderly person, and unless hiking to a climb, he keeps a slow pace, shoulders hunched over, cigarette in hand, and conversation rolling.

He holds nothing back, if you ask, but pause and Middendorf will be questioning you with earnest interest about your exploits on a 5.9 crack as if they were equivalent to his weeks of toil in Pakistan. He eagerly gives information on climbs he's done, wishing second ascenders luck, and, in his wealthier days, he's been known to give money to needy friends. Let him spend the night at your house during his travels, and you'll likely find a haul bag left on your steps after he's gone. "He's a really generous person," says the renowned wall climber Jim Bridwell.

But this is while he's on the ground. Get him a few hundred feet off the deck and he's been known to yell and set his partner

straight on the way things should be done.

"John was jumping our shit. He's all business up there," Zion local Brad Quinn says of a first ascent with Middendorf in 1993.

Middendorf agrees, "I've pursued a specialized form of climbing. I enjoy all types of climbing, but big walls — that's my focus and I've mastered it. It wasn't an easy thing to master. It took 15 years."

**B**ut Middendorf hasn't always been so confident. In 1986, he nearly died on Half Dome and subsequently took a three-year retirement from an otherwise prolific climbing

Photos: Ace Kvale

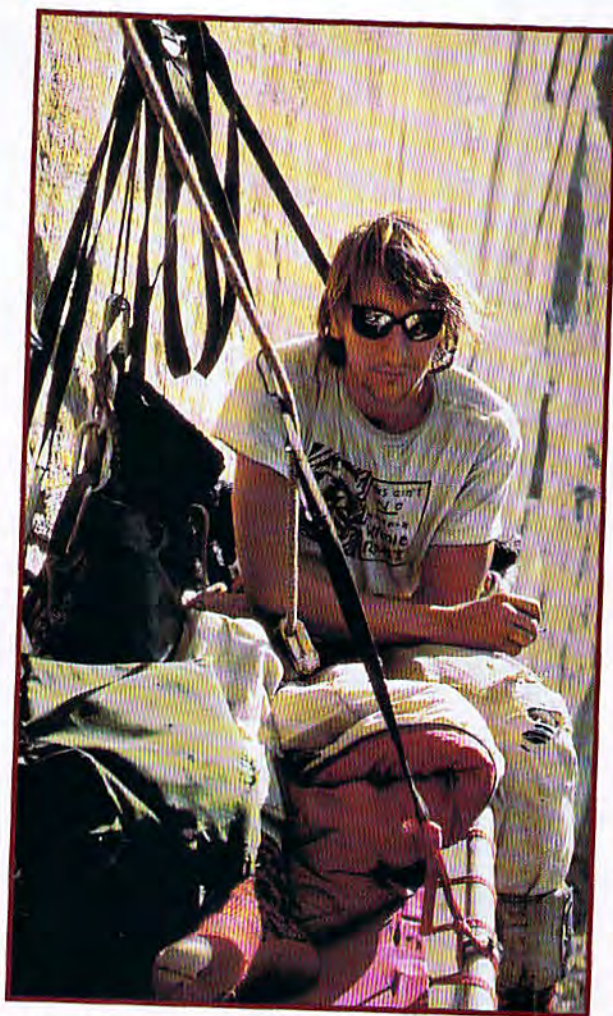
career. After having climbed several Yosemite walls, he had accepted an invitation from the then Valley locals Mike Corbett and Steve Bosque to do a winter ascent of the South Face on Half Dome, a route that, at the time, had seen more failures than successes.

Today, sipping coffee on a sunny cafe porch in Hurricane, Utah, just outside of Zion, Middendorf eagerly recounts the epic without a stutter, uninhibited by the running tape recorder. Grinding out a cigarette butt on the cement porch, he lights another and continues, "I pretty much had the game wired. I think I was feeling like, 'Yeah, I can do anything on big stones' ... until I was hit by that storm on Half Dome and just the feeling of helplessness all of a sudden, you know, we were trapped up there for three days and we almost died," Middendorf says. "I didn't have the guts to do a big wall after that."

The weather was good for the first three days of their climb. A newscast on the radio Middendorf and his two partners had hauled along announced that the approaching storm would be small. So, when the three awoke to drizzle Friday morning, the fourth day, they thought little of it. But by evening the enormity of the tempest and seriousness of their predicament became evident.

Middendorf did what anyone would do in his situation — he jettisoned the radio, and the three hunkered down for the first stage of the storm. Foot-thick sheets of run-off poured onto their portaledges, while wind-driven rain pelted the sides of their rainflies. "Our ledges would just never stop being lifted up, bang, bang, bang," Middendorf says, waving his arm in the air. The waterproof coatings on their rainflies began peeling off in sheets, and the portaledge frames required constant attention as they twisted and fell apart under the strain.

By Saturday morning, the second stage was well underway, with winds blowing over 50 mph. Rain turned to hail and snow, and wet gear froze solid. The food ran out and the temperature dropped. Bosque's ledge was soon rendered useless, with the fly torn and the frame broken. With Bosque and Cor-



**Valley days: after an A5 lead on the first ascent of the Atlantic Ocean Wall, El Cap, 1986 (above); and on "The Maze" pitch of Kali Yuga during the first ascent, 1989 (right).**

bett sharing one bivy and Middendorf in the other, the two remaining portaledges were quickly breaking down under the heavy snowfall. "Inside my ledge I made constant efforts to keep from being completely buried. Huge water-saturated snow piles would rise in moments ... a minute of inactivity and the weight of the snow would begin to crush me, tearing the fly apart at the seams, and become almost too heavy to push off," Middendorf later wrote in a story published in *Climbing*.

By dusk, not even physical labor could keep Middendorf awake and the snow began to pile up, deafening him to the yells from his partners. It wasn't until

Bosque crawled out of his bivy and onto Middendorf's head that he woke up. So the counting began. To stay awake, Middendorf counted to 22,000 in sets of 100, twitching with each count to fight off hypothermia.

Things looked better Sunday morning as the stars faded in the sunrise. But the marginal warmth never gave the three time to chip the ropes out from the mounds of ice before avalanches of softball-sized ice chunks pummeled their tired bodies. "There's no way humans can survive in those conditions. It was just relentless pounding on us."


With numb and clumsy hands they hacked at their ropes, futilely hoping for what seemed like an impossible self rescue. It was in this delirium that they heard a helicopter make its first sweep to check their location before lowering a rescuer to pluck them off the face. One at a time, they were hooped under their armpits with "horse collars" and lowered to safety.

After hours of shivering on the ground, covered in warm blankets, and drinking tea, and after three years of living in Yosemite Valley and eating hard wall climbs like rock candy, Middendorf packed his gear and left. It was the end of an era in his life.

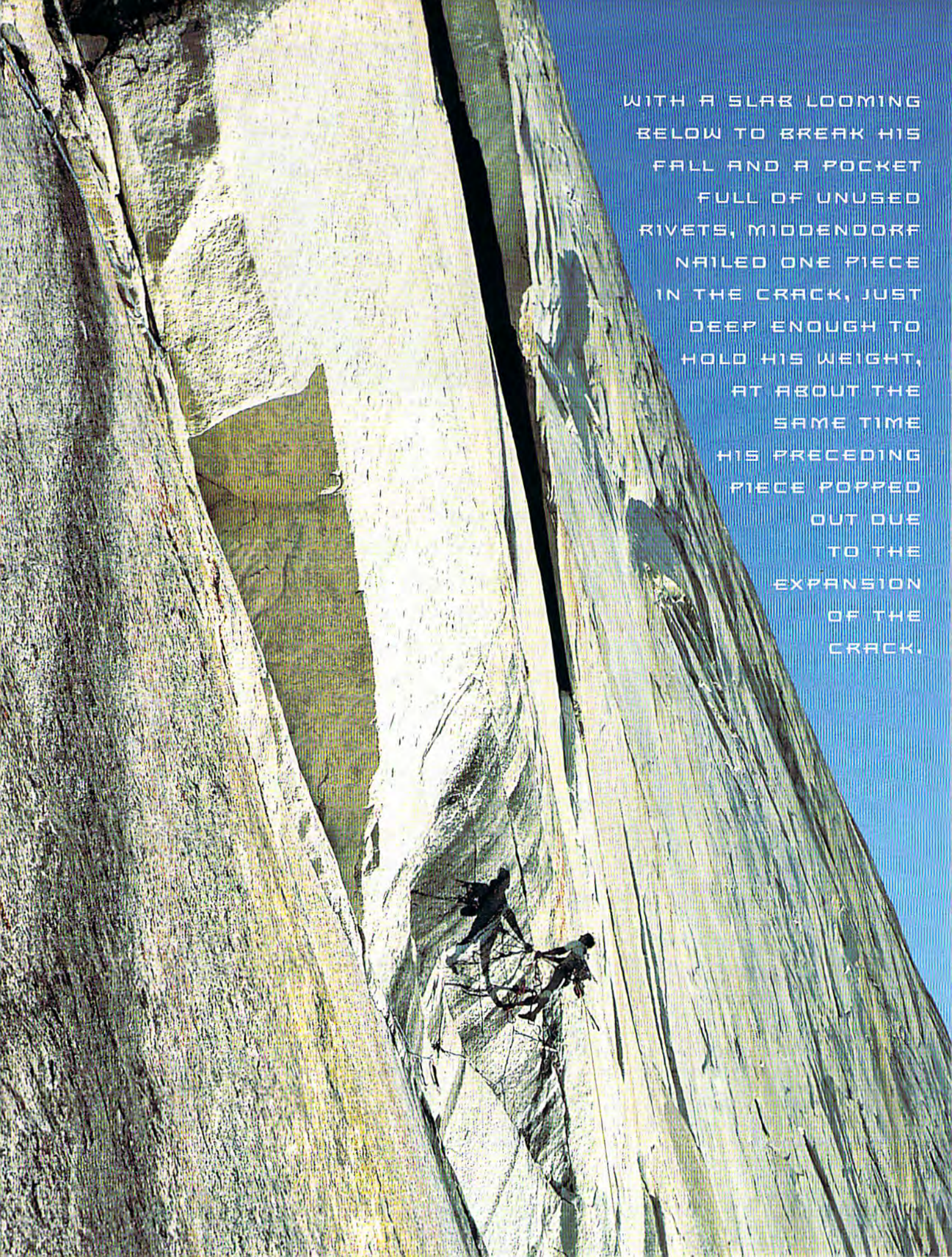
Middendorf had arrived in Camp 4 fresh out of college, at 24, for what he thought would be a two-week vacation. He rode in on a new motorcycle, with the idea of taking a break between job interviews.

Photo: Middendorf collection

Photo: Walt Shipley



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Middendorf customizing gear in the A5 shop.

Although he'd long had climbing on the mind — making camming devices in class, testing carabiners for projects, cragging when he had time, and even visiting Yosemite at 17 to climb Half Dome — John was primarily an Ivy League boy in search of a good engineering job when he motored into the Valley.

He had been following the more conservative career path his family expected. His father, John William, was a successful stockbroker on Wall Street, before beginning a career in politics as an ambassador to the Netherlands and eventually becoming a White House aid to former President Gerald Ford. Disliking the wealth and networking involved in the political arena, John chose to pursue a less social career.

He spent his first two years at Dartmouth and his last half at Stanford earning an engineering degree. He was in the top 8 percent of his class for engineers and already had a few lucrative job options. He had applied himself to his studies as early as grade school, and was clearly gifted. "In seventh grade I remember the math teacher was writing the problems up on the board, and as she was writing the problems, I was writing the answers, and we had an hour to do the test."

To further deter him from a career as a climber, Middendorf wasn't always a healthy child. He had asthma so severe he had to be hospitalized once, and, between the ages of 3 and 5, he suffered from a bone disease that kept him in a metal leg brace for two years. To make things worse, one of his legs was longer than the other, and as part of his treatment — which was eventually successful — he wore a high-heeled shoe on the longer limb. "One of my earliest memories was going to class and having the kids go, 'iron leg,'" he recounts.

John's parents never could have anticipated his career in climbing, and John says although he gets along with them, they're still a little bewildered by it. "They don't understand it. They would understand if it were golf," John says.

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But when Middendorf arrived in the Valley with a lifetime's worth of walls looming above him, the idea of a mainstream desk job

faded fast. "It just turned me inside out [to think] I was going to sit in some office for the next 10 years," he recalls. Of course, meeting Yosemite legend Werner Braun in the parking lot of Camp 4 didn't help the career cause either.

The two met when Middendorf ran to Braun's rescue. Braun was unsuccessfully attempting to put brake fluid in an old Pontiac that was slowly rolling away from him when Middendorf lent a hand. Braun returned the favor by planting a seed in John's mind. He suggested Middendorf stay in the Valley and work for Yosemite Search and Rescue.

During the ensuing years, Middendorf averaged a dozen big walls a year, while he worked for Search and Rescue just to scrape by. "I had some real inspired months where I did like three walls ... I was just really motivated that whole [time] I was there," says Middendorf, as he flips through his tattered, greasy journal filled with lists, maps, and cartoons mocking then Valley locals and climbers, Werner Braun, Todd Skinner, Walt Shipley, Russ Walling, et al. Those drawn by Middendorf are quite tame compared to the graphic cartoons designed by his cohorts, in which all involved generally have their pants down and are puking. But these are the ones that Middendorf reads aloud, giggling uncontrollably with tears swelling in his eyes, as he reminisces about his Valley days.

"Walt [Shipley] and I had lots of days soloing. Often I wouldn't follow him; definitely he would be the bold one when it came to stuff like that. Then we'd go back and drink Old English 800 at the deli and talk shit for hours and hours. It was so healthy and energetic, really, even though we did decadent things like that. We were physically fit and we were really pushing our standards."

## FIRST-ASCENT SUMMARY

### 1985

- FIRST WINTER ASCENT OF ZENYATTA MENDATTA [VI 5.10 A5], EL CAPITAN
- AUTOBAHN [V 5.11+], HALF DOME
- FIRST SOLO ASCENT OF NEVER NEVER LAND [VI 5.9 A4], EL CAPITAN
- ATLANTIC OCEAN WALL [VI 5.10 A5], EL CAPITAN

### 1986

- SOUTH FACE OF MOUNT CONNESS, SIERRA NEVADA

### 1989

- KALI YUGA [VI 5.10 A4], HALF DOME
- ROUTE 66 [VI 5.10 A4], YOSEMITE FALLS WALL

### 1990

- ABRAHAM [VI 5.10 A4], ZION
- ADDED DIRECT FINISH ON THE COSMOS [VI 5.8 A4], EL CAPITAN

### 1991

- SWISS-AMERICAN ROUTE [VI 5.10 A4], ZION
- DAYS OF NO FUTURE [VI 5.9 A3+], ZION
- THE BEAR [IV 5.10 A2], NAVAJOLANDS
- THE TEAPOT [III 5.8], NAVAJOLANDS
- THE SITTING HEN [II 5.8], NAVAJOLANDS
- FIRST SOLO ASCENT OF STANDING ROCK [IV 5.9 A3+], CANYONLANDS

### 1992

- FIRST WINTER ASCENT OF HALLUCINOGEN WALL [VI 5.11 A5], BLACK CANYON, COLORADO
- GRAND VOYAGE [VII 5.10+ A4+], GREAT TRANGO TOWER, PAKISTAN

### 1993

- ISAAC [V 5.10+ A2], ZION
- BIRDBEAK SPIRE [IV 5.10+ A2], ZION
- BALANCED ROCK, COLORADO NATIONAL MONUMENT
- FLIGHT OF THE ALBATROSS [VI 5.10+ A3+], EL CAPITAN
- THIRD EYE [VI 5.10 A4], NORTH FACE OF MOUNT HOOKER, WYOMING

After such bouts, Middendorf would return to his wet tent, parked by his motorcycle in Camp 4. "I remember sleeping in a puddle every night for the winter. The water just came up through the tent. I lived really cheaply; it wasn't a problem."

The unique 'training' regime worked — Middendorf became one of the best wall climbers in the Valley, some months spending as much time on the wall as on the ground. "He's sort of spontaneous," says Bridwell. "Some people talk a lot about it and never do it. John doesn't talk about it very long and then he wants to go do it." In 1985, one of his most successful years, he began with the first winter ascent of *Zenyatta Mendatta* (VI 5.10 A5) with Shipley, followed by a first ascent of *Autobahn* (V 5.11+) ("but it's 5.12 really," Middendorf adds) on the southwest face of Half Dome. Although Middendorf's current emphasis is on new aid routes, he climbed many a hard free route in Yosemite between his first ascents, including the classic *Astroman* (V 5.11c).

The same year, he also concentrated on speed ascents to hone his wall skills, climbing the *Pacific Ocean Wall* (VI 5.9 A4) in under four days, the *Nose* in a day on the winter solstice, and *Lost Arrow Direct* in a day. He attempted the *Shield* of El Capitan in a day, and finished it in one and a half.

Middendorf had goals for the year too. He had been eyeing a new line on El Cap to be his great project, but was a tad late. He'd decided to do the first solo ascent of *Never Never Land* (VI 5.9 A4) on El Cap to train for the route, and when he returned Greg Child and Randy Leavitt had already started up what was later named *Lost in America*.

But Middendorf's first new wall route came the same year with an ascent of the *Atlantic Ocean Wall* (VI 5.10 A5) on El Cap. He spent weeks scoping the route, looking for partners, taking notes with a telescope, and getting gear ready. It was a big step for him, but he'd put in his time. Middendorf wanted a new A5, and he refrained from drilling rivets or bolts in an effort to keep the route challenging. "The crux was all nailing up this expanding thin corner, like a quarter inch crack. In places it was so thin you could actually flex it just by pulling on it," Middendorf says.

With a slab looming below to break his fall and a pocket full of unused rivets, Middendorf nailed one piece in the crack, just deep enough to hold his weight, at about the same time his preceding piece popped out due to the expansion of the crack. But he finished the pitch without a fall.

"If it's your creation, you're always faced with the decision of should I put in a rivet or go for it a little more? The point is

(continued on page 152)

the whole time you're up there, you're really being creative and you're pushing it as hard as you can. I mean, it's like your baby ... one rivet can really change the nature of a climb."

In the end Middendorf and his partner John Barbella drilled only 58 holes, 19 of which were for belay bolts. "The routes to the left and the right required more drilling than our route," Middendorf says. "That was a rewarding aspect because I think that's the name of the game — to find natural lines."

With multiple risky climbs under his belt, Middendorf began establishing A4 and A5 pitches as if he were climbing trade routes, but the Half Dome incident ended his vacation and an inheritance that came his way when he was 25 took the fun out of the grunge game. "Living there in Yosemite on somebody else's money didn't make any sense to me." Although he initially refused to accept the cash, he tapped into it after a car accident left him \$2000 in debt. Middendorf decided to leave the Valley and put his education to work, which had always been his intention.

**H**is skills as an engineer and his experience as a climber fit together well for his next project, to create a big-wall equipment company. Middendorf headed south in search of a new home, landed in Flagstaff, Arizona, and immediately started the designs for a wall hammer, the first product produced at Middendorf's company, originally called Big Wall John's — a fact he's not proud of. Middendorf saw a need for specialized gear, especially after his portaledge collapsed on Half Dome. The company, called A5, now makes everything from portaledges to haul bags.

"I feel like part of climbing is the science of climbing gear," Middendorf says. "And I've always wanted to contribute to the benefit of climbers in general." It took years of forcing himself into a professional career, sometimes working 100-hour weeks, to make the business successful. Middendorf now has about eight employees and takes pride in A5, which grossed about \$150,000 in 1993. Today, for the first time, he's seeing a return on his investment, as the company is beginning to make a little money (emphasis on little).

Taking a break from wall climbing doesn't seem to faze Middendorf. He may do 10 serious walls one year and none in another. "I'm a spurt climber," he says. "I climb in spurts." After his sabbatical in the world of business, Middendorf started climbing again with a vengeance. He started in 1989 with a few desert towers with an old friend, and really kicked things off with a return to Half Dome.

In 1989, during a five-week visit to the Valley, Middendorf joined Walt Shipley for a first ascent of the *Kali Yuga* (VI 5.10 A4) on Half Dome. "It was kind of a psychological boost for me because here I was on the same rock that had pretty much cooked me three years before," Middendorf says. And he was on a roll. On the same trip he also did the first ascent of *Route 66* (VI 5.10 A4) on Yosemite Falls Wall, and a seven-hour ascent of the *Prow* on Washington Column.

Middendorf was busy ticking off new climbs once again when the accomplished Swiss climber Xaver Bongard arrived in Yosemite. Bongard had already soloed *Iron Hawk* when he sought out Middendorf for information; he posed a simple question each time, "What's the hardest wall climb that hasn't been soloed?" John answered *Sea of Dreams*; Xaver climbed it. The next year, John answered *Jolly Roger*; Xaver climbed it. "He was just basically doing whatever was considered the hardest challenge; he wanted it," Middendorf says of Bongard. But when John suggested *Wyoming Sheep Ranch*, Xaver was tired of soloing and asked Middendorf to join him. They spent eight days on the route and added a direct finish up the Cyclops Eye, of which Middendorf is brazenly proud.

"I led this one pitch — it overhangs about 80 feet in 150, definitely the steepest pitch in Yosemite. I spent 14 hours on that pitch; I graded it A2+," Middendorf, who openly sandbags, says.

"It's kind of like a bridge-type grading. You know how when you bid in bridge you don't necessarily say three hearts even if you have a good hand?" He adds that if he rates a route with a double plus, "You better watch out."

The difficult route spawned a close friendship, and when Bongard invited Middendorf to join him in Pakistan in the summer of 1992, he started packing his bags. "Of course that was always my dream, to take all these skills I learned in Yosemite to some place remote and extreme," Middendorf says.

Middendorf chose the route and the two discussed the magnitude of what they were about to do. "I mean it's by far the hardest, most extreme big wall climb in existence. Everything else that even comes close has been done in a different style, like multi-thousands of feet of fixed ropes, which changes the challenge."

Add the objective hazards of avalanches, rock fall, and extreme weather, and the dangers double. Middendorf simply detached himself; he poured the risk into a test tube and measured it from a distance. "I realized on Trango that I had like a 50/50 chance, but that was enough for me. I said 'OK, let's do

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it.' It was mutual with Xaver; we both felt that way. You need to decide if it's worth it."

Greg Child, an alpinist who has made several expeditions to the area, says he initially thought the climb was a death wish. "I advised those guys against it. I saw massive amounts of shit fall down that route."

But Middendorf took the bait and was off. After a rigorous approach to the Trango Towers, he began putting his Yosemite skills to work scoping a new line. He made drawings of the route in the morning light, afternoon light, and at dusk. He scrupulously studied every inch of the peak, which soared to 20,440 feet, all while he rested for the two-man attempt. Middendorf and Bongard planned to commit themselves by climbing the 4400-foot wall with as few bolts as possible and only six ropes. "I would say Xaver was the stronger when it came to the climbing, but I was definitely the stronger with the logistics part, so we worked well as a team."

Their first obstacle came only eight pitches up in what they dubbed Gollum's Gully, a trough-like corner where they were hit by an avalanche. "If somebody throws a softball from maybe 20 yards away and hits you smack in the head, imagine that, but 10,000 softballs. That's what it was like. It lasted 20 or 30 seconds, but it seemed like an eternity, so we bailed off to the side." Undaunted, they decided to climb only at night when the ice and snow was frozen in place. For the next three nights they fixed their six ropes up the six-pitch gully in the clear light of a full moon.

The route involved Grade III ice, 5.10+ free climbing, and A4+ aid. The two sat through belays where they were pummeled by rockfall and avalanches, but they tried not to think about that. "Of course we were scared out of our minds at what we were doing. It just required a mindless sort of 'let's do this,' and you couldn't think about the next day, you could just think about what was possible to do that particular hour."

Middendorf cuts the story short, not willing to delve further into his feelings about the climb. The journal he kept in Pakistan is still dusty, held shut with a rubber band, and unlike his Valley journal, Middendorf refuses to open it, even for a private peek, he says. "It was a magical climb for me. The essence of it I'm sure I don't even come close to remembering in my conscious mind, and I remember after we finished and we started to go back home, already the intensity of it was fading."

"I feel like Xaver and I pushed the standards by a quantum jump when we did that climb," Middendorf says. He emphasizes that he speaks only of big-wall climbing. "The West Face of Gasherbrum IV is the epitome of its class of climbing, I can't compare it with the *Grand Voyage*."

**H**e's willing to take the gamble for a new route, but Middendorf has an acute awareness of what's at stake, as he has already lost more than one friend to the extreme. Bongard's recent death was particularly difficult for him. Xaver Bongard was killed in May when his parachutes failed while BASE jumping in Switzerland. "He was my best buddy," Middendorf says. "I always had the idea that he and I would get together and do some crazy project again because, you know, it's hard to find partners who will really stick their neck out for a route. That kind of energy is so rare. It hasn't

taken away my desire for the mountains so much but it's tough."

Dealing with death isn't new for Middendorf, he's already lost several people close to him. Once again relaxing on the sunny cafe porch, John leans back in his chair and glances out to the empty streets of Hurricane, then looks down to his jacket zipper and starts fidgeting with a loose thread. Exhaling, he lets the cigarette smoke roll across his face. "The first experience I had with that was when I was a guide in '78 at the Telluride Mountaineering School. I was 18."

John, one of two young guides at the school, had been enjoying one of the finest times of his life. "But it went from the best experience to the worst," he says in retrospect. His contemporary and good friend, Kevin Dippy, and a partner were killed on the Ophir Wall when their anchors pulled. John stayed through the summer only because of a sense of responsibility to the school. "I was really, really badly shaken," Middendorf says. He didn't climb for a year, and then experienced another heavy blow. His sister Martha, who suffered from epilepsy, died.

Martha was two years John's elder, and they were very close. "She'd always find something really bold and dangerous to do," he says. She hated having epilepsy and so she always did a lot of extreme things." Martha died when John was just getting settled in his first year of college at Dartmouth. She had been taking medication for her chronic disease, but the side effects made her miserable. "Basically, she stopped taking her medicine and she lived her life as full as possible. She was a goalie on the hockey team and it was after a practice and she had just worked out really hard and she basically went home and died." Middendorf pauses and, still fidgeting, looks up from the loose thread and back out to the empty streets.

More recently, Middendorf faced the death of another friend, Mugs Stump, who died on Denali in 1992, the same year he and Middendorf did the first winter ascent of *Hallucinogen Wall* (VI 5.11 A5) in the Black Canyon, Colorado. "Mugs and I had just been together a month before ... it was actually my first climb with him, but we had really gotten along well and we were talking about big climbs in Alaska. You know, I miss Mugs so much, all the time."

Despite these hard breaks, Middendorf has never considered giving up climbing. "When you're wall climbing you have lots of mini-religious experiences. I've definitely had some insightful times up there where some aspect of life becomes very clear all of the sudden."

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But Middendorf is once again taking a break (albeit a short one) from the vertical world, working primarily on his new Hurricane home (his first wood-working project since high school) which he shares with his girlfriend, Patty Laforge, known to many conservative Hurricane residents as his fiancée. Middendorf's lot stands out in the suburban-type town — his yard is an instant giveaway. With a dilapidated brick home that hasn't been inhabited for years, paint peeling off the walls, and mice roaming free, a brand new trampoline glistens in the desert sun in his backyard. "It's the first thing I got," he says, pausing to perform a few back flips. A tour of the home reveals a distinct lack of kitchen appliances, a missing front window, and a mousetrap. The rotting porch, overlooking a yard scattered with lumber and tools, is the location of choice for entertaining.

Middendorf takes a splintery seat to describe his current goals. He's now dividing his time between his new home in Hurricane, climbing walls in the nearby Zion, and working on a book on big-wall climbing with John Long, a longtime climber and writer. Middendorf's settled down in an area he refers to as the new Yosemite. He did his first difficult project in Zion four years ago with a first ascent of the 2000-foot Abraham via the *Radiator* (VI A4 5.10), which has yet to see a repeat. "It's a very challenging big-wall climb. It's different in essence than a Yosemite wall route, but at the same time it's a greater challenge. It's harder than anything I've done in the Valley and there's a lot more like that here."

On the 2000-foot sandstone face of Abraham, Middendorf and Shipley raised the stakes by placing only 17 bolts. "I haven't ever rap bolted a route. You need 10 bolts to put up a rap route, well, I could put up a 1500-foot climb with 10 bolts. I think the number of bolts per foot is a good yardstick for natural lines."

The pair did the *Radiator* in five thirsty days. The temperatures exceeded 100 degrees, their water was gone by the fourth day, and dehydration quickly turned the last day into an blur as the two clumsily rappelled the east side of Abraham. "We did about 17 rappels to get off that thing," Shipley says. "[At one point] I rappled down and John only had one pin in. I think he was getting dehydrated at that point." Shipley also began to show signs of dehydration when, on the same ledge, their rope got stuck, and Walt, who was unanchored, began jumping on it. The rope suddenly broke free, leaving him teetering on the edge.

"I had the grim vision of being stranded on this small ledge," Middendorf wrote in a story for *Mountain Reveiw*. "Unseen from anyone on the ground with Walt's broken body lying in the hanging valley below, and waiting to die of thirst — which wouldn't have taken more than 24 hours."

Now, in true Middendorf style, John sits on his porch, the sleeves pulled up on his old jacket, laughing about their adventure, and expounding on his love of climbing. "There's nothing better to me than waking up on a big wall and knowing that I've got a full day of climbing ahead of me, and a day after that and a day after that. Life becomes so simple."

Lisa Morgan is assistant editor at Climbing magazine.

## Barnaby is the black cat in my kid's easter book who stole all the easter eggs and threw them down the bunny hole.



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