

COMMON  
CLIMBER

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# John Middendorf *A Big Man for a Big Stone*

By David Barnes

*Suffering from hypothermia on the side of Half Dome in Yosemite during one of the worst storms of the decade, John Middendorf became life-threateningly aware that there were no storm-proof portaledge available at the time. Middendorf, an engineer and big wall climber, resolved to change that.*

*Common Climber Assistant Editor Dave Barnes interviews climbing and portaledge pioneer John Middendorf at his home in Tasmania.*

John Middendorf has reggae music playing in the background of his shed. The aluminum building has a workbench square in its middle on which alloy frames and materials lay. These will be joined with pinpoint accuracy and cutting edge technology. Renowned big wall alpinists will surely one day own the finished product, a state of the art portaledge.



Freycinet, Tasmania, Apline (12/5.6)

John sits opposite me and sips his coffee. To his immediate front there is a colourful trapeze and swing set for his kids. It took a while for John to settle into a conversation. He is one of those men that when he gets a focus he is in that space and anything else can be a distraction. I realised I just had to go with it. As small talk turned to common talk, I could see his tall frame loosen up and then the words started to flow. I was just about to have a campfire conversation with a legend of climbing at 11 a.m. on a weekday morning.

I asked John to start at the beginning and we would take it from there. His words started spluttering as old cars do when you ignite the engine, but soon he was revving, in his element, and I was scribbling like a mad thing to keep up. I asked if he was always a climber?

“When I was a kid I tried baseball and I flunked at it. In America if you are not at the top of your game in any sport you don’t always get a fair go.” I got the feeling that in John’s story he wasn’t going to sit around a dug out waiting.

During the long summer breaks from school, his peers were starting to smoke pot and drink, and life seemed aimless. John was introduced to climbing at a Mountaineering School in Tuolumne, California. The school gave him mentors and mountains to look up to. It was like boot camp for John, but there were *Sound of Music* moments in between. The discipline did not rock his boat but the climbing did.

"When we started getting amongst it, particularly the rock climbing - the self efficiency and the mindfulness that accompanies - it made me think, *this is something I could do.*"

Henry Barber, a highly accomplished climber of that era was an instructor at the Mountaineering School and saw that John had some talent. Henry took him down to the San Juan Mountains in Colorado to learn the craft, proper like. John became animated:

"We did a new 5.10 (Aus 20) in the San Juans at a remote crag near the Animas River, and somehow, at age 16, with only a year of climbing under my belt, I got up it."

The jack jumped outta the box and John was now hooked with further trips but the Emerald City of climbing was, Yosemite.

"Yosemite was the centre of the climbing universe and I just seemed to gravitate there." Like John and thousands of climbers since, I have shared that gravitational pull.

John's first big wall route in the Valley was a of an aid-solo of the Prow on Washington's

Column (380m) at the time a 5.8, A4 aid route which required nailing pitons, which John had never used before. This was followed by an ascent of the Leaning Tower (5.7 A3+ 250m), one of The Valley's steepest and most wildly swinging routes for climbers to check their mojo on. Ascents of cutting edge routes were going up everywhere by the likes of Jim Bridwell and Gred Child. These were great times for John as he learned his craft in some of the most exciting times of Yosemite climbing.



John on Excalibur (A3, 5.8), El Capitan, 1998

It was all going well, but he had that grown-up lecture hustling away in his brain that he needed to secure an education and career. He finished his Mechanical Engineering degree from Stanford University in 1983 and set out to join the "real world." At this junction mainstream-John made a fate-filled error.

"I decided I would do one last trip to Yosemite to say goodbye to my climbing life."

The big stone spoke to him, it turned into a "*where you have been bro?*" moment.

"I never really turned back and got a job on YOSAR (Yosemite Search and Rescue Team) to support my climbing." For the next several years John climbed like a man possessed and being on the rescue team he built firm friendships. YOSAR kept young climbers from starving. John smiles as he shares these times in Camp 4 and of living the dream climbing.

"In 1980 you could live off \$200 for a couple of months. Between climbing and

rescues it was like, get the job complete and let's party!" after each pay check came in. Hazard pay for a high angle rescue was at the time \$10.50 per hour, and \$7 per hour for simpler rescues, of which there were many.

Sometimes he and his Camp 4 bro's would strike it lucky. John sits back in his deck chair and gazes skyward. He is settling into a comfortable story.



John (right) with Tom Frost (1936-2018), a big wall climber with many FAs in Yosemite (along side Royal Robbins, Chuck Pratt, and Yvon Chouinard).

"There was this *Gillette* commercial, featuring John Bachar. John hired me and I hired friends."

In the mid 80's, whilst acid and tights made an entry to rock-climbing, John was on fire knocking off a dozen big wall routes per year. The majority of the climbing community even today would be happy with just one big route, not John. There was no sponsorship, for the love of climbing only - he was the real deal.

In its early days, speed climbing was something only a fringe of climbers in The Valley did or could do. On the 21st of December, 1984, John and his "Energizer battery" partner, Dave Schultz put their collective energy together and completed a record breaking one day ascent of The Nose on the shortest day of that year, and all in daylight from dawn to dusk.

“We got to Camp 4 (2/3 the way up) on the route in four hours but the upper half was wet from winter seeps so we slowed down. Dave actually cramped up around then too and by *tree time* I had ended up leading most the route.”

It was the fastest known ascent at that time completed in 10 hours and 45 minutes. Not a bad Christmas gift for these climbers. I'd be happy to get up it in within a week.

John flicks through climbing names like a card shark shuffles cards. Climbers like Dave Schultz (now a master rigger in Hollywood), Steve Sutton (first ascentionists of The magic Mushroom on El Capitan and partner of Lynn Hill on her legendary first free ascent of the Nose), Scott Cosgrove (known for his boldness on lead and another master rigger, as well as bouldering cap for 5th ascent of Midnight Lightning at Camp 4) and Walt Shipley (a legendary and wild climber, “*A climber who wired at 240 while everyone else was on 120*” –Karl Baba). As John was talking, my mind was whirring from the names he had just rolled off his tongue, each in their own right were the highest calibre of Yosemite climbing during their time there.

John continues his story.

“They paid me \$600 a day for this rigging job which was huge money back then.” John smirks at me, a cheeky boy type of smirk. This was getting funny.

“We also got to stay in the deluxe Yosemite Lodge, and I got a room key.” Those last five words are like a person from the burbs saying, *I won the lottery*. To get a room key at the lodge opened up that *other world* to dirt bag climbers.

"In The Valley the room key means you can go anywhere and do anything and it all gets charged to the room. It was like, *I'll have a table for 17 please*. For Gillette it was nothing but having seventeen climbers sit at a table with flash grub is anything but normal." I get a feeling from his tone and his waving hand that not everyone at that table had had a shower in a while.

In 1981 between climbing and learning Engineering at College, John first came to Australia. What he found was a country full of kind people and great climbing. He climbed up and down the eastern seaboard from Frog to Moonarie, spending time on his own but being given a couch to sleep on when needed and ropes to share with many Australian climbers of the time.

"Tony Marion, Mark Morehead, Rod Young, Greg Moore, Paul Hoskins and HB (Malcolm Matheson) were climbers who took me under their wings."

Australia in the early 80's was all about hard and bold free climbing. There was a hunger for hard that was more organic than the United States. John added, "Crushing first ascents at places like Cosmic County in the Blue Mountains and living the life at Arapiles made my first trip to Australia so memorable." John loved the culture.

"Australians love to take the piss out of each other which was unusual for an American. I learnt from those climbers that you have to give as you could take. Problem was, and still is, I'm not good at that so I get the piss taken out of me quite often!" We are both laughing now.

When John returned stateside he was psyched. John was not meant to go slow and was often pushing shorter 5.12 routes and longer 5.11+ free routes as was the flow back then, including some first one-day ascents of formations such as Liberty Cap and Lost Arrow wall. This was a new climbing culture that was beginning to rise.

John began expanding on his learning and travel. He was pioneering the El Capitan

routes of tomorrow like The Atlantic Wall (VI, 5.10, A5), full of expanding flakes at the cutting edge of aid climbing. John showed that he had the gravy to go with his chops. The Valley scene witnessed a rising of the dare, John's friends knew of his potential for a long time and it is still respected. I asked long time Yosemite Valley photographer and climbing historian, Tom Evans if he remembers John?

"John was and still is a big influence in Yosemite climbing." For an embedded photographer who has witnessed the rise and rise of big wall climbing in the Valley, that's an indicator of John's legacy.

## The Storm

When pushing edges, sometimes climbers come unstuck. John had this experience in 1986 when caught in an evil storm on the South Face of Half Dome (5.9 A3 666m; ha!). The climb has a big roof down low, then 1200 feet of steep slabs. When it rains then it becomes a waterfall with the potential to be nightmare. In what turned out to be one of the worst storms in Yosemite history, John and his companions were caught in a mass of cascading water. Their gear was soaked, nothing stayed dry. Then the temperatures dropped and everything froze solid, including their ropes, cutting off any chance for descent. It was a life or death scenario, a time for prayers to the *Great Other*, for last thoughts, and of enduring bitter cold. Pure hopelessness. John has these moments scarred into his memory.

"I shivered violently for hours, then stopped and started to drift off in a dreamy state that is typical of hypothermia. My clothes felt sticky and uncomfortable, and I wanted to take them off despite the sub zero temperatures. Steve Bosque was the real hero—he did his best to keep us all awake, which involved stepping on my head at one point. After one of the most technical helicopter rescues of the time, we were plucked with the aid of my YOSAR companions from our frozen perch. Mike Corbett was hospitalised for hypothermia, and as I thawed out, in the relative warmth of my van, I again shivered violently for many hours.



John has never forgotten the fear and discomfort he and his companions went through and of the failing portaledges that gave them no protection from the squall or respite from the rain and snow.

"The technology wasn't there in portaledges for a storm of that caliber at the time." said John.

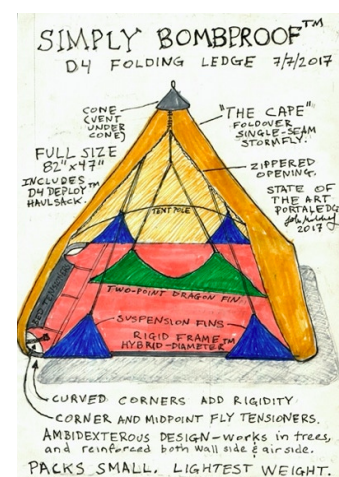
A climbing life of exploring possibilities, tinkering with ideas and developing the world's first truly stormproof portaledges and other climbing gear followed.



Simon Mentz and John hanging out on one of his portaledges on the route, Ozymandais - one of Australia's longest and proudest aid lines at Mount Buffalo



The D4 Full Sized Portaledge. "Thirty years after first re-inventing the portaledge with the A5 design in 1987, in 2017, John Middendorf produced the first expedition D4 portaledge for Marek Raganowicz, who then used it for an extreme expedition in Baffin Island where he lived in it for 30 nights on two new big wall routes."



## The Ultimate in Gear Testing - Big First Ascents

John moved from Valley granite and pine trees, to high-desert Flagstaff and nearby desert Navajo lands - land of many unclimbed sandstone spires, a new sort of climbing and less claustrophobic than the Yosemite scene at the time. John developed a deep love of loose sandstone and he continued to jam his way to glory on desert towers and on new routes when not working developing his portaledge

and building a company called [A5 Adventures](#).

There was a series of advertisements by the company at this time in the climbing magazines. I remember them clearly. The drawings of a middle aged bald guy with a cherry smile and the body of a 21 year old carrying no end of gear on a make-believe cliff was somehow appealing even to me. The company did very well throughout the 1990s and John was sitting pretty on his portaledge company. His climbing only amped up, it was not uncommon to see him first ascents of extreme free and aid routes on the giant walls of Zion National Park.

In 1992 John was feeling adventurous, again, and headed for the Great Tango Tower in Pakistan (6286m) teamed with Xaver Bongard.

"I had the most fun with Xaver. He was a wild guy and someone you could count on in any situation."

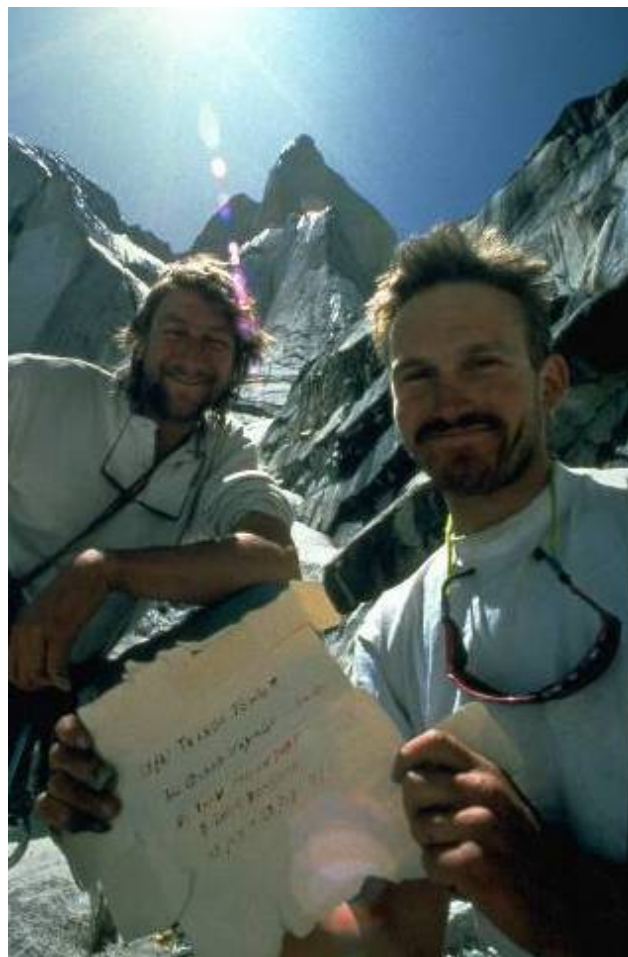
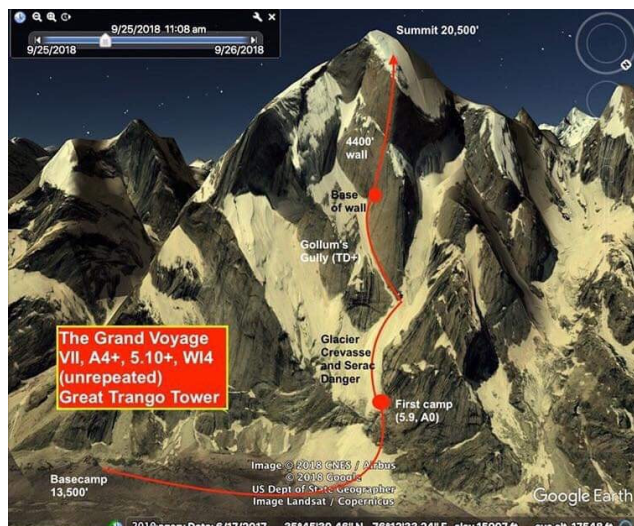
Their goal was to climb big wall alpine style (no return to base to camp just climbing continuing via bivouacs on the wall). The result was Grand Voyage, a 1350m deranged and overhanging wall on the tower - the tallest vertical and overhanging rock wall in the world.

This climb was jaw dropping, requiring 15 consecutive days of climbing, at times extremely technical aid, often insane, on otherwise beautiful golden granite. John's lightweight equipment made this ascent more feasible in a style not previously attempted in a place where fixed anchors, fixed ropes and trade routes did not exist. John realised the future was beckoning in these remote places and took these experiences back to his drawing desk and sewing machine. He continued to refine his portaledge design creating even lighter weight and super strong portaledges for the next big frontiers --remote big walls like those found in Patagonia, the Canadian Rockies, Baffin Island and the Karakoram.

"My interest has always been in the mountains. I consider Yosemite a training ground for big walls, big stuff elsewhere."

John has seen and shared much with other climbers on the most extreme hard walls

on the planet. When I was speaking with him in our deck chairs by his work space, he had a glaze in his eye - the thousand yard stare.



Xavier and John after completing their Trango Tower FA.

As he mentioned the names of climbing buddies, it became apparent that many of them have died in the mountains. John holds their memory and it's a heavy load. It must be difficult for John to let go of people he shared a rope with, that he had loved and cared for and had done the same for him. I believe that is the reason for John working so hard on his craft, it is to make superior equipment that will sustain life and protect climbers as they push themselves in wild places. He does this for the memory of friends.

I asked John for his thoughts on big wall climbing today and into the future. Every comment from John is like listening to the Principal of Hogwarts and I felt a like Harry Potter (or to be more honest his side kick, Weasley). He listens carefully and speaks

slowly seeking purpose in his words, he does not talk needlessly.

## The Next Huge Breakthroughs

"I am always pleased to see how things progress. The freeing of the Dawn Wall took 10,000 points of aid, more than the typical aid climber, but in the end created the most difficult free climb in the world. Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson have set a new standard of technical difficulty on big walls. But to me, the overall barometer of big wall free climbing standards is the person who walks up the wall and flashes the route, onsight, first try. This has been done a few times, but often these ascents pass by with little notice."

John is one of the Valley hard men who refined older standards and raised the bar again. From men like these, modern climbers can stand on their shoulders to have a poke at the future. John talked of the where the future may lead.

"The next huge breakthroughs will be climbs of the most massive walls on earth, like Jannu in the Himalaya, on sight and in alpine style (i.e. no fixed ropes). He also elaborated on the means to do this.

"Climbers can follow but they can also explore the boundaries of *can*. They can look at new horizons, new walls at other locations throughout the world. The tools are important. With portaledges like my new D4 design and other cutting edge equipment amazing new stuff can be achieved." John paused and placed a cautionary comment.

"I don't see merit for climbers who head straight from the gym to The Big Stone and work a route over months to free climb it, and expect that that is the way forward. Already there has been conflict on El Capitan due to the mass of climbers and of fixed ropes."

John spends his week designing, refining and distributing his handmade

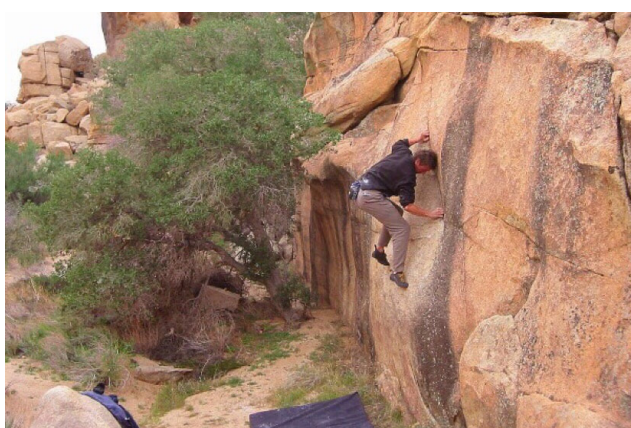
portaledges to climbers who want to push harder in tight situations throughout the world. One of these is the German climber, Thomas Huber. Thomas was the first major pioneer of El Cap free climbing in the early 2000's, climbing the first free ascents of the North American Wall and Zodiac, and has achieved notable first ascents like the multi pitch 8b+ route (5.14 or 32), *The End of Silence* in Europe. He's also advanced other speed records on the big stone coupled with mission impossible big wall routes across the globe. I asked Thomas to give me his take on the man he calls, *Deucey*.

"When I first met John at a North Face workshop in the states he was already my all time hero. I used his gear on Latok II and have promised him to use his gear again. I know that [climbers] can realise big games in the mountains because of the improvements in alpine tool. There are many companies involved but there is just one special person..., it's Deucey. I know that he will never stop exploring and improving!"

John is not focused on sales. Even when I was there he was arranging a number of his ledges to be shipped to an environmental group. He cares for the people who perch themselves upon it and what it enables people to do, including the protection of our wild animals and their habitat. John is focused on developing a brand based on integrity and authenticity. It means a lot to him as an engineer and as a climber. I could see by the order of his workplace, the care of his materials and the quality of his tools that this was consistent. You can tell a lot of a man by the way he cares for his tools.



Today, John still climbs to keep his head in the game, but for the most part he is a devoted family man with children and a wife he adores. He has found shelter in Tasmania living in a sea cottage close to the ocean and checks into the climbing gym with his kids to meet his mates Pablo Prichard and Conrad Wansbrough each week on a designated evening. There is a wealth of climbing and adventure to be had between these three and they talk more than they climb, a perk of having survived the days of chance living on the edge in precipitous places. When it is his turn, John Middendorf comes to the belay and Conrad ties in ready to climb. Conrad could be in no better pair of hands.



Next is John Bouldeibg an A5 problem at Joshua Tree. John visits his American friends and family regularly.

John's legendary portaledge designs can be obtained at: <https://bigwallgear.com/>