



el capitan

historic feats and radical routes

John Middendorf and Mike Corbett, two of the most committed El Capitan climbers

of the post-Bridwell era, both arrived in Yosemite at the height of Bridwell's reign. Like Bridwell, they were soldier's sons, though of very different backgrounds. Where Corbett's father served two tours in Vietnam and came home a disillusioned Democrat, Middendorf's father was Secretary of the Navy. A gangly, long-limbed man of nearly forty, with an utterly disarming face, Middendorf grew up in McLean, Virginia, started climbing while in boarding school, and became the youngest guide at the Telluride Mountain School before majoring in engineering at Dartmouth. Corbett, a short, stocky man with a Yosemite Sam mustache and a gentle, self-effacing demeanor, had been to nine different schools by the time he graduated from San Francisco's George Washington High, and he never went to college at all—just quit his first job after six months and moved right to the Valley. Corbett's parents had split up long before, leaving his mother and sister well out of touch back in Houston and his brother in the Eighty-Second Airborne out of Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Soon after moving to Yosemite, Corbett lost contact with his family altogether, so much so that they thought he was dead for about the next twenty years. Letters they sent never reached Corbett, and he didn't write or call.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, the climbing world was primarily focused on the more immediate pleasures of short free routes. But when Middendorf took a summer off boarding school, borrowed his sister's car, and drove it straight across country to Yosemite, entering the Valley on a moonlit night, he spent half an hour just staring up at El Cap, wondering if he'd ever be good enough to climb the thing. In a two-week trip, Middendorf

crammed in a handful of big climbs, including Half Dome—waiting at the bottom of which he'd watched a bottle thrown off the summit explode a few feet away from him, then saw another climber fall eighty feet to the ground and break a leg. A few years later, he had transferred from Dartmouth to Stanford in order to be closer to Yosemite—only to find none of the valley locals interested in climbing big walls with him. So, he took up roped soloing, first on The Prow, in 1980, and then on Zodiac. Roped soloing is a system by which a lone climber belays himself, leading upwards while anchored below. At the end of a pitch, the climber builds a second anchor, rappels to the previous one, and then jumars back up, cleaning the pitch as he goes. He climbs the entire route, in effect, twice, and rappels the entire route once; he does absolutely all of the leading himself, and also all of the hauling, and performs a somewhat extreme exercise in self-reliance. Leading the second pitch of Zodiac, Middendorf was experimenting with a new self-belay system when he fell and had what he calls his first experience with time slowing down. Falling as fast as gravity would take him, he says he realized he was going to hit the ground, so he grabbed a loop of rope out of the air and wrapped it behind his back and got two huge grooves burned into his arm and body as he smacked into the wall, holding himself in a body belay. It's an astonishing claim, stretching the bounds of credibility, and yet clearly the story is not fiction. Realizing he was going to be in a lot of hurt in a big hurry, Middendorf says he rappelled to the ground, lay down in the sun, and couldn't move for two hours because he was in so much pain, crying and watching people bathe in the Merced. A few nights later, a pretty girl named Lydia crawled into Middendorf's hammock, changed his life forever, and earned a place at his side on his return to the Zodiac.

Corbett, on the other hand, had been up El Capitan in the neighborhood of twenty-five times by 1984, with almost as many different partners. He told me there were about five years there when "people used to kid me that I should just get my mail up [on El Cap], 'cause I was up there all the time, and I don't know what that was all about except I just enjoyed it. It was real peaceful, it beat working, it was better than anything else I had going." And while Corbett was ratcheting up his El Cap climbing—by January of 1985 he would reach thirty—Middendorf, who had climbed the wall only half a dozen times, was ready to go cold turkey. One man was still burrowing into a world apart from his family; the other, feeling the tug of his family's expectations. Upon his graduation from Stanford, Middendorf sold all his climbing gear, sent out applications for mechanical engineering jobs, and was on his way to Montana when he made the mistake that probably redirected the rest of his life: stopping off in the Valley for one last look. Within a few days, Middendorf had landed a place with Corbett on Search and Rescue, by that time, the only way to camp in the valley for free, with no limit to your stay. While participating in technical high-angle rescues, team members made about \$14 per hour, averaging around \$2000 per year, and they saw ghastly, unforgettable things. Middendorf, for example, participated in the body-recovery operation of a woman who'd done over a thousand airplane jumps, but chose El Cap for her first parachute jump off fixed ground. Airplane jumping, Middendorf told me, is the easier sport, because you are already at high enough speed to control your movement, and there is also nothing to hit. Jumping off a fixed point like El Cap, he said, one can't steer for the first few seconds—until a certain speed is reached. According to Middendorf, this woman "back-slipped" towards El Cap without realizing it, and El Cap

Tower took off the top half of her head before she could pull the cord.

During those years, Middendorf froze in the winters in his lousy Jansport tent, put up six new big routes, and survived by rigging ropes for television ad-shoots and scrounging leftovers from cafeteria tables. When the tent got too cold, he bought a 1971 VW camper van with no engine and used it as a cottage in the parking lot. He describes those years as socially challenging, in the sense that it was pretty hard to meet girls. Most of his time was spent alone, on what Middendorf now sheepishly admits they called the Three Day Plan: one day to get ready, one day of free soloing on LSD, and one day to recuperate. Both Corbett and Middendorf put up new routes on El Capitan, some of them quite difficult—including Middendorf's A5 Atlantic Ocean Wall and Corbett's A5 On the Waterfront—but none that ascend new terrain from bottom to top. There simply weren't any top-to-bottom routes left, which is probably why a kind of malaise pervades the memories of wall climbers from this period. Dale Bard, the great El Capitan obsessive of the 1970s, and one of Bridwell's partners on Sea of Dreams, says he began putting up new routes simply for the pleasure of visiting certain places on the wall. Greg Child established two of the best routes of the 1980s—Aurora, which is a long variation on Charlie Porter's Tangerine Trip, and Lost in America, which joins Bridwell's Zenyatta Mondatta near the rim. Child describes the moment when he ran out of unclimbed terrain on Lost in America as like reaching "a place of dead roads." He also laments the democratic *festschrift* that had taken over the naming of El Capitan routes. In his book *Mixed Emotions*, Child recalls Robbins's outrage over the drug-tinged names of the 1970s, like Tangerine Trip and Magic Mushroom, names that so clearly signalled a generational shift away from the high-seriousness of Robbins's 1960s. Child decries

the then-contemporary rise in names like Wyoming Sheep Ranch, which he sees as “a gauche slap-in-the-face nightmare of bestial images.” Child is relieved only that the perpetrator, who has since left climbing for what Child calls a “Faustian pact with money” on Wall Street, failed to climb a line next to the Sheep Ranch and name it “Iowa Pig Farm,” as he apparently intended.

The druggy 1970s, in other words, have given way to the money-crazed 1980s, and to their attendant post-modern failure of meaning, their inability to see any great endeavor as other than comic and pointless. Witness the names of Middendorf’s and Corbett’s own contributions to El Capitan: while in the tradition Child prefers, they clearly broadcast their late place in history. The Atlantic Ocean, after all, is measurably smaller than the Pacific Bridwell claimed (itself derivative of Robbins’s North America), and Middendorf’s route shares terrain with an older route that was itself already in an ironic dialogue with the foregoing route names: New Jersey Turnpike. Likewise Corbett’s *On the Waterfront*—a variation both in name and terrain of the old Waterfall route.

Corbett’s and Middendorf’s big wall careers overlapped most closely in March of 1986, when they set out with Steve Bosque to repeat Warren Harding’s route on the south face of Half Dome. In the early hours of their fourth day on the wall, while they slept in porta-ledges on the sheer face, a storm hit the team with high winds and rain, and Corbett’s porta-ledge soon collapsed when moisture loosened its tensioning straps. According to Middendorf, Corbett got soaked to the skin while trying to rebuild his ledge, and then Middendorf’s own ledge began to lose shape. Soon, he too—along with his sleeping bag—was as drenched as if he’d jumped into a lake. A foot-thick sheet of water was pouring down the face and rain was driving sideways in

wind that, by dawn, had exceeded fifty miles per hour. Temperatures then dropped and their tangled ropes and other gear froze solid against the wall. Water-saturated piles of snow began to accumulate on the rain-flies of their tattered porta-ledges, such that Middendorf was nearly crushed by the weight. As the sun fell that day, with the storm still raging, Middendorf let himself fall asleep, and he recalls dreaming that he was in a boxing ring, being soundly thrashed by an array of opponents. He woke up to find Bosque standing on his head: seeing Middendorf's entire porta-ledge disappear under a pile of wet snow, Bosque and Corbett had climbed on top to dig him out. After that, in an effort to keep from falling asleep—which would surely have been fatal—Middendorf counted to 22,000 and made himself twitch with every number. By the next morning a rescue helicopter had found them.

In the aftermath, both Corbett and Middendorf redirected their lives. Middendorf, after moving to Arizona to get away from wall climbing, started the legendary A5 equipment company and reinvented porta-ledges in such a way that no future climber would ever suffer the way he and Corbett had. In 1989, Middendorf got back into wall climbing, and in 1992 he put his new porta-ledges to the test by heeding an old but famous call from Yvon Chouinard, who had declared that the real future of Yosemite climbing lay not in Yosemite but in applying Yosemite techniques to the "the great granite ranges of the world." Yosemite Valley, Chouinard once predicted, "will, in the near future, be the training ground for a new generation of super-alpinists who will venture forth to the high mountains of the world to do the most esthetic and difficult walls on the face of the earth." And so, the climb on which Middendorf now properly hangs his hat: not his El Capitan routes at all, but his Grand Voyage on Pakistan's Great Trango Tower.

With a three-thousand-foot snow and ice approach, and four thousand feet of hard aid and free climbing at high altitude, this climb is still considered one of the hardest big wall climbs ever done.

Corbett, for his part, got a janitorial job at the Yosemite medical clinic in order to pay off medicals bills incurred during his recovery from the Half Dome disaster. The job led to Corbett's first apartment, in the basement of the clinic, to a romance with a nurse, and to the drop in his annual El Cap rate to about twice a year (which brought him to forty-one ascents by 1987). It also led, in a roundabout way, to the opportunity that changed Corbett's life. In 1989, the very year in which Middendorf himself was getting back into wall climbing, Mark Wellman, a paraplegic Yosemite ranger, asked Corbett to take him up El Capitan. While planning the climb, building the customized gear, and developing the techniques for getting a paraplegic up the wall, Corbett also wrote a letter to Tom Brokaw at *NBC Nightly News*, a letter that was quickly answered with a request to film the whole climb. Corbett led the ascent, via Charlie Porter's Shield route, and Wellman, amazingly, pulled himself up ropes fixed by Corbett, doing the equivalent of seven thousand pull-ups. A little over half way, as a result of the television coverage, Corbett's girlfriend radioed up to say that his brother Tony had phoned. Corbett's mother, father, and sister, in their various cities, had all recognized Corbett on television, and nephews and nieces he'd never met were saying they would only eat cold bagels and cream cheese, because that's what they'd seen Uncle Mike eating. When they finally scrambled over the top, with Corbett actually carrying Wellman on his back, somewhere in the neighborhood of fifty reporters were waiting, including a helicopter television crew. Tom Brokaw actually interviewed them right at the edge of the cliff, for *NBC Nightly*

News; in an exquisitely shameless twist, Brokaw had arranged for Corbett's sister and mother, whom he hadn't seen in twenty years, to participate in a three-way reunion interview.

From there, Corbett's story is one of escalating meaning. According to Wellman's memoir, *Climbing Back*, an unfamiliar woman approached Corbett on the trail that very afternoon. "Six years ago today," she told Corbett quietly, "on July 26, 1983, my son committed suicide in Yosemite. Every year on this date, I come back to Yosemite to think about my son. And every year I cry. But this year, because of what you two have done, I didn't cry. From now on, when I come back each year, I am going to celebrate the life of my son, instead of his death. You two inspired me to do that, and I just wanted you to know." During the climb, Corbett got a sliver of metal stuck in his cornea, and the doctor who removed it afterwards waived the fee—which would have bankrupted the still poor Corbett—in exchange for an autograph for his son. An audience with President Bush followed, en route to which a flight attendant announced the presence of Corbett and Wellman on the plane. A round of applause erupted from the passengers, and a steward brought a free bottle of champagne. In Washington, they were put up in the presidential suite at the Washington Hilton, and even Warren Harding called, asking to be taken up the Nose for the thirty-first anniversary of his first ascent, an experience Corbett puts ahead of meeting the president.

Still more good things followed, as Wellman threw out the first ball of an Oakland A's game, with Corbett at his side, and in April 1991, Corbett married a ranger he'd met through Wellman, with Wellman as his best man. "Looming directly above us," Corbett wrote of the ceremony, "as if it were the guest of honor, was my old friend, El Capitan." In a foreword to Wellman's book,

then-Senate Republican Leader Robert Dole claimed an affinity to Wellman as a disabled American and compared Wellman's ordeal to his own ordeal of being wounded by German machine-gun fire in the mountains of northern Italy. Shortly after Wellman and Corbett finished their climb, Dole reported proudly, "the full U.S. Senate was voting on my resolution to commend them for 'their extraordinary feat of bravery . . . setting an outstanding example for all Americans and persons with disabilities.' The Senate isn't known for agreeing on much, but on this issue, it was unanimous." The nation, in other words, was united in its belief in the value of what Corbett and Wellman had done.

But greater than all those kudos was the final twist with Corbett's family: someone at Continental Airlines saw Brokaw's interview and arranged to fly the entire Corbett clan to Yosemite for free. Corbett recalls much change: everyone looked older, for one thing, and he had five nieces and nephews; perhaps most significant, his once overpowering father had had six strokes and was clearly quite disabled. In Wellman's book, Corbett describes the pleasure he felt upon discovering that both of his siblings had named their firstborns after him, and that while his father said little that day, he followed everywhere, staying close to Corbett's side and listening carefully. "At lunch," Corbett remembers, "he took the seat right next to mine, and he leaned close to hear every word I said." At one point, Corbett writes, "I complimented my dad on his watch, and he slid it off his wrist and gave it to me."

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And now? Well, Middendorf did about ten more walls in the years after Grand Voyage, but his interest cooled after the loss of a few friends and the

realization that, as he put it, "I was up to a level of wanting to put my life on a fifty-fifty kind of line." Then there'd been a period of cliff and bridge jumping, with standard climbing ropes. Driving me up to Yosemite one evening, Middendorf talked about a bridge jump he'd done nearby, how he didn't land right—this was back in the eighties, before they'd even thought of using chest harnesses, and his back bowed and popped a few times. He was dangling on the bottom for a long time, thinking he'd broken his back, and by the time he'd jumared to the top again he could barely move. Then a friend jumped, but caught a piece of gear on a bridge bolt and hung there screaming, "Help! Help! I'm going to suffocate! My ribs are breaking! I'm going to die! Oh God, help me, Deucey, help!" Limping over in pain of his own, Middendorf pulled the guy up enough to free him from the bolt.

A passing motorist heard the screaming and stopped his car, ran to the bridge edge, and looked off just in time to see Middendorf let his friend plummet. The poor motorist turned to Middendorf and said, "He's dead, isn't he?"

"No," Middendorf replied, "we're actually just goofing off."

"That's a helluva way to have fun," the man retorted, enraged. "I'm going to go call the cops right now."

Well, that meant Middendorf's friend had to do a lickety-split jumaring job—and they slipped out just as those whirling colored lights came around the bend.

And just that May, Middendorf and the late Dan Osman had jumped off a bridge in Glen Canyon, with a 467-foot drop in a canyon only 200 feet wide. Because rope jumps require you to jump off to the side of your anchor—so as not to squarely impact the rope—Middendorf had to

jump quite close to the cliff face. Over the five seconds of freefall, the wind blew him closer and closer to the canyon wall, until he was no more than twenty feet from it. Just before he would have been torn apart, the wind shifted again, and drew him back to safety. When he came to rest, he hung fifteen feet from the canyon floor.

“That sounds intense,” I said, a little unnerved.

“Yeah,” Middendorf admitted, “it was actually a little too intense.”

In fact, in the time since, Middendorf has gotten to work at reinventing himself yet again. He has sold his A5 Outfitters to The North Face, taken courses at Harvard in the architecture of tension fabric structures, and hurled himself into an environmental legal battle over the future of the Yosemite climbers' campground. He's become active in the American Alpine Club—giving back to the sport that has given him so much—and has moved once again to Arizona, where this world-class climber has somehow landed work as a Colorado River rafting guide in the Grand Canyon.

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El Capitan towers 3,000 feet above California's Yosemite Valley, a perfect granite wall that has called out to climbers for years. By far the most coveted rock climb on earth, this is the first book devoted to its unique history. In *El Capitan*, writer Daniel Duane recounts the vertical adventures had on this sheer face, from Warren Harding's 45-day siege in 1958 up through the recent speed climbs of under 5 hours. Offering engaging, emotional insight into the famous climbers of each decade, Duane articulates how El Capitan can totally consume a person. He brings to life the ferocious competition between El Capitan pioneers Royal Robbins and Warren Harding in the early 1960s, the elusive mastery and wildness of Jim Bridwell in the 1970s, the parallel lives of John Middendorf and Mike Corbett in the 1980s, and the perverse commitment of Scott Burk in the 1990s. Accompanied by thirty-five gritty, historic duotones that capture the essence of big wall climbing, *El Capitan* pays appropriate homage to the greatest rock in the world.