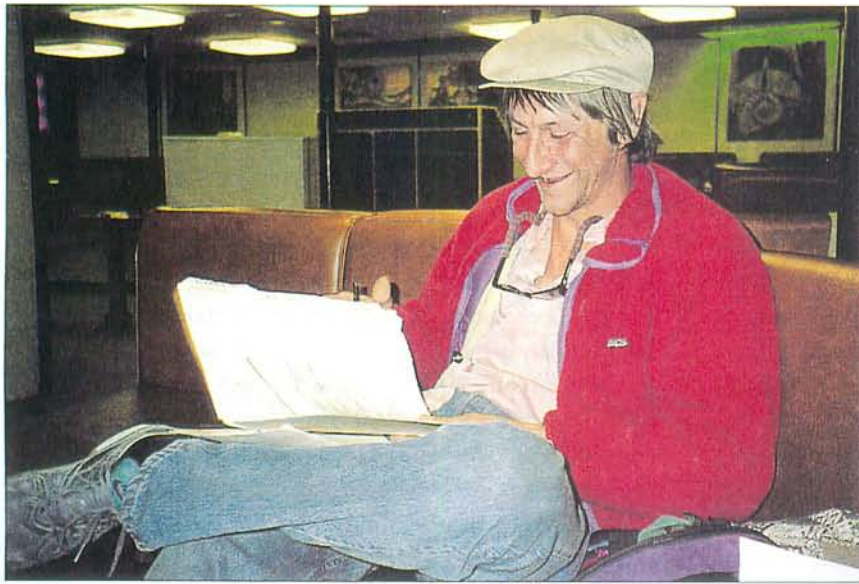


SCOTTISH MIXED CLIMBING / 1970s YOSEMITE / MIDDENDORF PROFILE



Scotland / Mixed blessings

Middendorf / Big wall flowering



Left: John Middendorf  
 Right: Leading pitch  
 fourteen of El Capitan's  
 Muir Wall.  
 Below: Middendorf's  
 rescue from Half Dome in a  
 bitter storm contributed to  
 a three-year absence from  
 Yosemite.

# john william middendorf

John Middendorf became a household name when he summited the Great Trango Tower with Xaver Bongard on July 28th, 1992. With eighteen days of extreme and exceptionally dangerous climbing, their route was, quite possibly, the most



difficult wall climb ever done. **Cameron M. Burns** profiles one of America's less orthodox heroes, and Middendorf himself describes four of the walls he climbed in 1993 on page 62.

**F**or the then 32-year-old John William Middendorf IV, Trango was the culmination of half a lifetime's worth of training for his ultimate goal – to climb the world's most extreme cliffs and do it in impeccable style. And with his eyes set on Patagonia, Baffin Island and other areas, Middendorf is just hitting his stride.

'He's certainly in the forefront of what's going on right now,' says Jim Bridwell. 'He's trying hard routes and doing a good job on them, certainly in good style. I recognise his ability.' You couldn't get a better recommendation.

Things weren't always so easy for this son of a New York investment banker and a nurse – a guy who grew up the perfect nerd and was even bullied by other kids at school. In fact, there were times when Middendorf wanted nothing to do with big rock faces and even feared their looming bulk and the awesome natural forces they contain.

Born on November 18th, 1959 in New York City, John grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut with three sisters and a brother. When he was eleven, the family moved to Holland where they lived for three years. Upon returning to the United States in 1973, the family moved to McLean, Virginia. Although he would later make extensive cragging trips throughout the East Coast, John's first experience of rock climbing came when the 14-year-old was shipped off to summer camp in Telluride, Colorado.

Ice, snow and rock climbing and other mountain craft were all part of the curriculum. Dave Farny, the instructor, taught his students not only to climb but how to exist in the mountains. Minimal impact was practised religiously and the lessons would have a big influence on Middendorf later on. Middendorf returned in the following years, guiding those younger than himself.

At age fifteen, he began top-roping at Carder Rock and Great Falls. He made trips to Seneca and the Gunks, when he was fifteen and sixteen. At the ripe old age of seventeen as a junior in high school he headed off to Yosemite for his first wall-climbing experiences climbing Half Dome, Washington Column and the east buttress of El Cap. Although there were a lot of young climbers in 1976, there weren't a lot of seventeen-year-olds cruising Half Dome.

'There are just awesome long walls everywhere in Yosemite. I knew right away that's what I wanted to do,' he recalls. 'All I'd seen before that were small crags, and all of a sudden I'm looking at these 2,000 and 3,000-foot cliffs and I'm going, "Wow!"'

Middendorf completed high school in 1977 a straight 'A' student. He then studied engineering at Dartmouth College for two years, becoming involved with a group of eastern climbers that included Neil Cannon, Thom Englebach, Steve Chardon and Ted Johnson.

By the age of nineteen Middendorf was climbing 5.11, which wasn't bad considering that the top grades of the day weren't much higher. Middendorf also got into ice. He and

Englebach made several excursions in the north-east, including solos of several classics at Huntington's Ravine on Mount Washington, routes which Middendorf describes as being 'way over our heads'.

After two years at Dartmouth, Middendorf transferred to Stanford University near San Francisco. Weekends were spent on jaunts to Yosemite. He graduated with a bachelor of science degree in mechanical engineering with honours. For most summers during college, Middendorf worked on his career, getting jobs in engineering and honing himself for a career with a slide rule in his shirt pocket. In 1981 during his third year at university, he took six months off to go on a cragging tour of Australia. The decision to climb rather than concentrate on preparing himself for the wild world of engineering was a harbinger of things to come.

'They hadn't seen a lot of Americans over there at that time. Maybe a handful, so I got good, royal treatment because they all wanted to sandbag the Yank. I was in the newspaper over there – "Visiting American Comes to Climb at Our Local Rocks" – it was Arapiles actually, which is, of course, now known as one of the best crags in the world.'

Middendorf returned to the States, graduated from Stanford, sold almost all his climbing gear, bought a motorcycle, and toured the country doing job interviews.

'It was going to be my last little stint,' he says of the motorcycle trip. 'It was like, okay, youth's over, gotta go to work. I could climb working as an engineer, but up to then I spent a lot of time living in Joshua Tree or Yosemite, and I really knew that what I loved the most was spending extended periods climbing. It's every climber's dream, I imagine. And I realised that doing that and working nine-to-five were mutually exclusive. So I basically said climbing will be a part of my life but now I've got to buckle down and become an engineer.'

After an interview in Santa Barbara for what sounded like a 'pretty dull job', his next interview was in Ohio. On a whim, he decided to spend a week in Yosemite before motoring out east where he'd knuckle down and become a part of middle America. Middendorf knew a few climbers in Yosemite from his college days and stayed a while, climbing a little and, in his own way, said goodbye to America's premier crag. Just as he was preparing to leave California, Werner Braun offered the young engineer some advice:

'He suggested to me I get on the rescue team. There were a couple of spots open. It was February 1984 and I ended up staying on the rescue team for two and a half years.'

So much for the corporate ladder.

It's easy to drift into some sort of ambivalence in Yosemite, where each day is strung together between visits to the Yosemite Lodge Cafeteria and hours in campsite procrastinating over routes and thumbing through the guidebook. One wall climbed gives an exceptional motive for staying off another. Call it part of Valley syndrome, call it the doldrums, but in Yosemite, even if you're motivated it's

**Right: Middendorf in 'The Maze' on Half Dome's Kali Yuga during the first ascent with Walt Shipley. This route marked Middendorf's return to Yosemite walls after the Half Dome rescue in 1986.**

easy to just hang out.

Not so for John William IV. His two and a half years in the Valley, from 1984 to 1986, produced a remarkable resumé of wall routes, traditional free routes, solos and, most importantly, first ascents.

'I did at least twelve walls every year, I climbed El Cap every month of the year, I did almost 40 walls in that time, he said. 'I must've climbed with a hundred different people while I was there. I was rather motivated.'

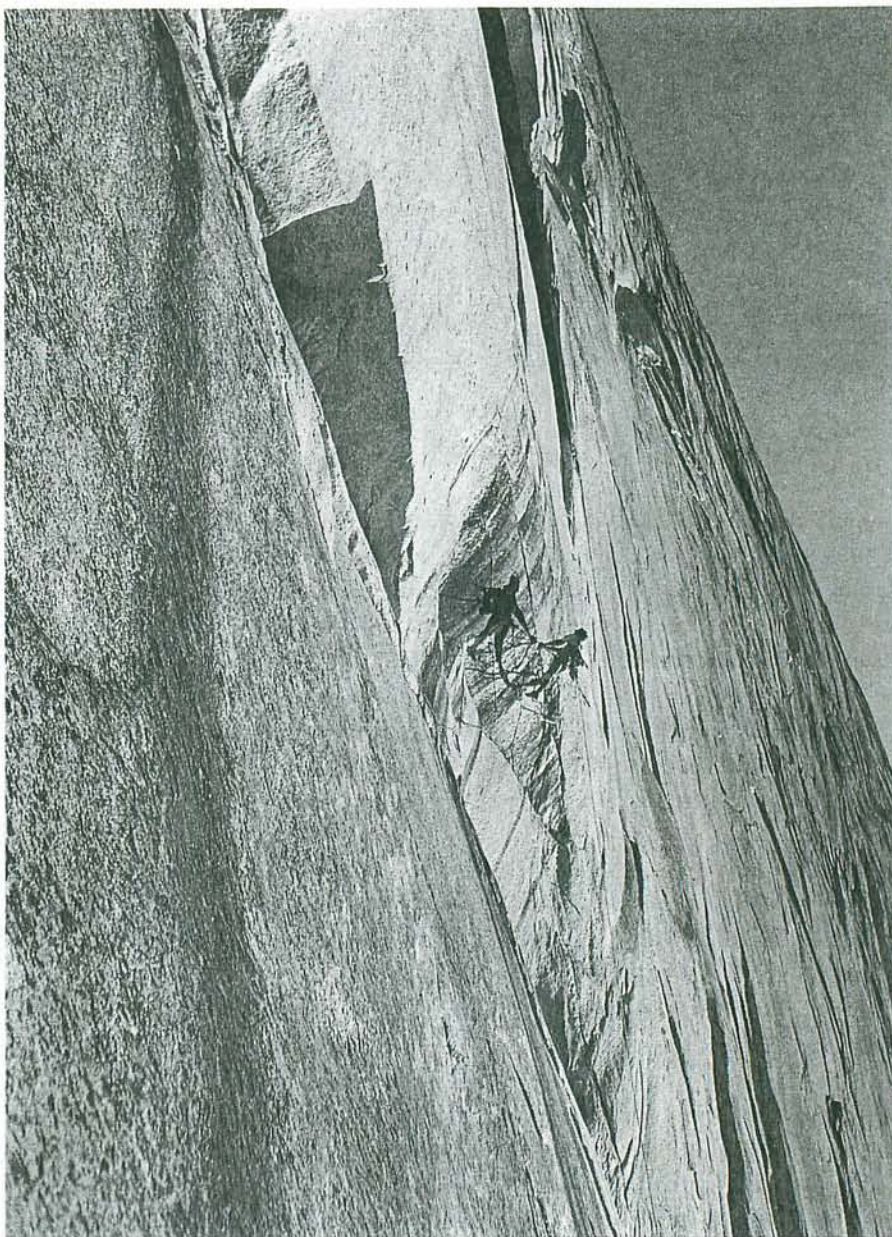
His partners included some of the nation's best and most famous climbers: Braun, John Bachar, Walt Shipley, Scott Cosgrove, Dave Schultz, John Barbella, Mike Corbett, Steve Bosque, Rick Lovelace and Alex Lowe to name a few.

'Werner Braun was my main mentor when I was in the Valley,' says Middendorf. 'He's got a really pure attitude about climbing. That rubbed off a lot.'

Although the Atlantic Ocean Wall (VI/5.10/A5) on El Capitan – first climbed with John Barbella in 1985 – was a noteworthy achievement, Middendorf sees the route as something of a consolation prize after just missing out on Lost in America.

'I had done fifteen El Cap routes but I really wanted to do a new one,' he recalls. 'And I had a few picked out, but they kept getting stolen, like Lost in America. I was really psyched to do that line. I had made a map and everything. I remember I told Charles Cole about it, because we were buddies at the time. I borrowed his telescope to look at it. He came over and looked at it and said, "Yeah, that's a good line." I couldn't find anyone to climb it with me, so I was going to solo it. Back then, I tell you, it was really hard to find wall-climbing partners. So I soloed Never Never Land as training. I got back and Charles met me in the Meadow and he said, "I've got some bad news for you." I knew exactly what he was talking about.'

Randy Leavitt and Greg Child were on the route. In vain Middendorf hiked to the base of the wall and began taunting the pair, trying to psych them into giving it up.



WALT SHIPLEY

'I was saying things like, "Hey! You guys! You having fun up there? It's pretty hot, isn't it?"' The taunting didn't work and Middendorf lost his prize. 'Then I did the Atlantic Ocean,' he continues. 'It's only three-quarters of a new line and then joins New Jersey Turnpike. The true prizes are fully independent routes.'

For a consolation, Atlantic Ocean is a striking climb, taking an uncompromising line and a couple of big roofs before joining the New Jersey Turnpike fifteen leads up. And Middendorf did get to put up some now coveted classics, most of them toward the top end of the scale. Autobahn (V/5.11c) for example takes a wild line up the south-east corner of Half Dome, climbed with Charles Cole and Rusty Reno. Middendorf led the crux pitch – mandatory 5.11+ free climbing – that earned him some criticism for not making the lead aid-climbable. Regardless, the climb was labelled 'brilliant, a five-star route' by *Climbing* in 1986.

Another big tick for Middendorf was the first winter



MIDDENDORF COLLECTION

MIDDENDORF COLLECTION

ascent of Zenyatta Mondatta (VI/5.10/A5) with Walt Shipley in 1985, one of the more difficult lines on the big stone. Shipley, who bailed off after a few pitches because he feared bad weather and then returned, says Middendorf was the driving force behind that climb.

While Middendorf's mid-1980s sojourn in the Valley produced a raft of traditional free and wall routes, some of which have since become hard classics, it was probably speed climbing where he and his various partners made their biggest mark.

Speed climbing is something much more difficult to track than normal first ascents and often goes unrecorded altogether. During his Valley years Middendorf managed to pull off the first one-day ascent of the direct route on Lost Arrow Spire in eight hours with Dave Schultz, the west face of El Cap in four hours, the north-west face of Half Dome with Hidetaka Suzuki in seven hours, south face of Washington Column in four hours and Astroman and Rostrum in a day with John Bachar. Middendorf and Schultz also had what was probably a record time on the Nose, ten and a half hours climbed on the winter solstice. Other parties had faster times but had used fixed ropes. Middendorf and Schultz did not.

In fact one of his earliest climbs in the Valley was a speed ascent of Hockalito – Mescalito with the Hockey Night in Canada start – in 1984 with Alex Lowe in just three and a half days. It was one of Middendorf's first nailing routes and the pair sped up the cliff in what was likely record time.

'Even my first big nailing routes, I knew I kind of had the knack for it,' John says. 'Plus I was climbing with great partners. But I really felt like I could push the wall climbing aspect of climbing. I was doing a lot of these routes in fast times. But I wanted to push it to wall climbing. I really wanted to do the Zodiac in a day because I knew that would go.'

While high-speed wall climbing was somewhat popular in the mid-1980s, it wasn't *that* popular and Middendorf had a hard time finding a partner for the Zodiac. Longtime Valley resident Mike Corbett expressed interest in doing the Shield in a day. It wasn't the Zodiac but Corbett wasn't up for a

one-day ascent of the Zodiac. The pair left at midnight and managed to climb 24 pitches – to Chickenhead Ledge – in seventeen hours. They had just a few hundred feet to go.

'It was 7.30pm and getting dark. We got the headlamps out. It was a really cold and windy day and we didn't take warm clothes. I had a T-shirt and a pair of Gramiccis. Mike was wearing about the same. We weren't prepared at all. You ought to take a couple of days worth of food and warm clothes.'

One of the party's two headlamps was broken and, with enthusiasm waning, the pair decided to camp out. That night a storm hit. At 3am it started raining, then sleeting and finally snowing. The two climbers shivered all night.

Struggling up the last three pitches, they still managed to do the wall in under 36 hours, probably the fastest ascent of the Shield at that time.

'I think,' says Middendorf, 'that route was a pioneering effort. Even though it wasn't the first one-day ascent of a nailing route it wasn't until five years later that people were teaming up to do them. Now I'm too old for that kind of stuff.'

In March 1986 Middendorf quit wall climbing altogether. Three days up on the Harding-Rowell route – one pitch above the Cyclops Eye – on the south face of Half Dome with Steve Bosque and Mike Corbett a wild storm hit. It turned out to be one of the worst in Yosemite history. In a storm the south face becomes one of Half Dome's larger water drainages.

'It almost killed us. We had a two-foot waterfall pounding down on us for a day and a half,' says Middendorf. 'Our portaledges couldn't handle it. They'd fall apart on us on a regular basis. And it was freezing cold water. We were soaked and it lasted for about 30 hours, all through the night. Then it started to get cold and started snowing and sleeting on us. It snowed like five feet on the ground. But on the wall it was snowing at five feet a minute because of the angle of the wall. The rock was basically covered with a four-inch sheet of ice. There was no way. We couldn't move. Our ropes were just solid chunks of ice.'

To make matters worse, the trio was continually buried by



MIDDENDORF COLLECTION

XAVIER BONGARDO

avalanches of snow and ice cascading off the rock.

'It seemed like hundreds of pounds of ice,' said Bosque, a longtime Valley expert himself. 'I'm sure it was.'

Although about three dozen rescuers worked two days getting to the top of Half Dome in miserable conditions, the trio was plucked off Half Dome by a helicopter.

'Storms are always really nutty,' says Middendorf, 'because you're so helpless and you can't move. Even if there's a ledge a few feet away it could take you hours to get there. Those are the most frightening, wild times. That actually scared the shit out of me, because we came so close to dying. I came down from that and, basically, didn't climb another wall for three and a half years.'

'It changed my life too,' added Bosque. 'It was a pretty close call. That was quite an epic for us. The thing went on for several days giving you time to ponder.'

At one point, shortly before the rescue, Bosque and Corbett thought Middendorf, slumped over in slings with snow quickly covering his body, 'had left us'. Middendorf hadn't; he was just sleeping. Bosque, trying to confirm John's condition, stepped on him, waking him up.

'He was really hard core,' recalls Bosque. 'I think he even had tennis shoes on. He was so calm during the whole thing.'

The south face should have been Middendorf's fortieth long route in Yosemite. Instead he quit the Valley and moved to Arizona.

'It's tough to say the reasons,' he recalls, adding that the Half Dome rescue was just one of several factors. 'I knew it was time to move on. I was more ambitious than just in climbing and starting a business was a good project.'

The business Middendorf decided to start – with the help of a small inheritance – was A5.

'I realised there was no gear around for wall climbers. There were no good hammers available, no good portaledge. It wasn't being made. Forrest used to make some stuff, Chouinard used to make some stuff.'

But by 1986 there wasn't a whole lot available. I first made a big wall hammer, that was my only business at first. In the first couple of years it was hell. 1988 and 1989 were

Thumbs up all the way.

Far left: A5 gear testing on El Cap.

Middle left: Essential big-wall espresso facilities.

Middle right: After the first ascent of Atlantic Ocean Wall on El Capitan with John Barbella.

Above: On the summit of Trango after the Grand Voyage.

just hell. Basically, everybody said there's no way you can make a big wall manufacturing company work. Nobody had faith that there was a need for anyone to make high-quality portaledge and haul bags and big-wall climbing equipment. Everybody was pessimistic.'

Middendorf didn't prove the nay-sayers wrong overnight. It took two and a half years of hard toil before the business was breaking even. Middendorf spent most of his inheritance making A5 go.

'It was tough,' John says. 'Actually it sucked.'

But most great stories have a happy ending. In 1989, A5 made a little bit of money. This year it will gross somewhere in the region of \$150,000 and now has eight full-time employees and struggles to keep up with demand.

Moving to Flagstaff opened up a whole new world for Middendorf: the desert. The town sits close to most of the important desert climbing areas: Zion, Canyonlands, Navajolands. And like Wyoming's Wind Rivers, the Colorado Plateau offers probably more unexplored climbing potential than any other area in the country. Except for an ascent of Castleton tower in 1980, Middendorf hardly knew the area. In his first desert year with Bandito climber Stan Mish, Middendorf picked off the last major unclimbed Sedona spire, the Mushroom, a six-pitch prize.

'I liked that sandstone stuff,' he says. 'To get up a three or four-pitch desert route has the same essence of commitment as you do on a ten or twenty-pitch granite route. My main fire is doing big faces but the training you get on those desert climbs is unbeatable. You've got to be proficient at moving from free to aid and back to free again at a high standard. Plus, you're always doing it with a ton of gear.'

Over the years Middendorf has been able to climb about 35 spires, about twenty of them first ascents. Some of Middendorf's firsts have been true desert prizes. The Bear,

for example, which he climbed in 1991 with American legend Jimmy Dunn, was the biggest unclimbed formation in Monument Valley at the time. But undoubtedly Middendorf's biggest contribution to desert climbing has been in Zion, where he's climbed about fifteen walls, half of those firsts.

'It's much more challenging than Yosemite,' he says. 'A splitter crack, like Lost Arrow size, would be A1 in granite and no problem. In Sandstone it's almost automatically A3 because if you have to start doing a bold section off even a good section of Arrows, you can't trust 'em to stick. You simply don't have pieces that will hold a 30 or 40-footer.'

After the rescue on Half Dome, Middendorf stayed away from the Valley for three years. Finally, in October 1989, he returned and immediately set about resurrecting his superb Yosemite wall career, climbing four major walls in just five weeks. One of the highlights of that trip was the first ascent of the Kali Yuga (VI/5.10/A4) on Half Dome, which he

**'His hair's all dirty, he hasn't showered in a week and his bags are covered in dirt and sand. This is the classic John Middendorf. He's not a man who's afraid to sleep in the dirt.'**

climbed with wall ace Walt Shipley, one of the world's best wall climbers. Shipley had been working on Kali Yuga solo and by late October, when Middendorf arrived in the Valley, had just pulled down the last of his gear to await the spring.

'It was his idea to go back up on it,' recalls Shipley. 'I wasn't really all that psyched having spent the previous month on it. It just wasn't working for me. But I remember he was psyched for it. We were a little worried about weather, but when I was with John, right away I knew I was going to do the climb. That was kind of a breaking point for him. He hadn't done any walls since he'd been rescued. I didn't know it at the time and we didn't even talk about it. It wasn't any thorn in my side, but I guess it bothered him. He was glad to get back into it with such a glorious route.'

Except for two gear placements on Tis-sa-ack, Kali Yuga was a completely new route on one of the world's most coveted pieces of stone. It snowed on the pair on the last day, which 'put the fear of God into us' as Shipley recalls because the climb then became a case of get off the wall or face the consequences. The pair bivvied on top of Half Dome after topping out.

'We got up in the morning – his hair's all dirty, he hasn't showered in a week and his bags are covered in dirt and sand. This is the classic John Middendorf. He's not a man who's afraid to sleep in the dirt.'

With a major prize under his belt, Middendorf was back in action: 'Basically, I came out of retirement in those five weeks. I did the Kali Yuga, the Prow in a day, the third ascent of the Sheep Ranch and a new route on Yosemite

Falls Wall, Route 66. I felt pretty much back into it.'

Since then his career has been a remarkable alternation between big desert walls and Yosemite's granite cliffs. In 1990, for example, Middendorf teamed up with the legendary Jimmy Dunn to repeat Dunn's 1972 solo route the Cosmos. The pair even added a direct finish. It was Dunn's first wall in almost two decades. Dunn is full of praise for Middendorf:

'I felt really confident up there with John,' said Dunn. 'It was great knowing he was with me.'

Then, in the same year, Middendorf and Shipley also climbed a grade VI route on Abraham [see MoRe 5 for an account of this route], one of the bigger features in Zion National Park.

In 1992, Great Trango highlighted a career that just keeps going up. While his ascent with Bongard could easily justify the conclusion of an outrageous life in the mountains, Middendorf sees it as a step towards other extreme walls.

'Sometimes in the Valley it was hard to tell there was a higher standard to achieve, because it's so easy just hanging out doing climbs that are below your limit, but I like to think there are higher accomplishments to be had,' says Middendorf.

While he does acknowledge climbers like Steve Gerbeding, Scott Stowe and Dave Bengston who are breaking speed records left and right on El Cap's hardest nailing routes, Middendorf does not believe that the future of wall climbing lies in Yosemite, at least not for him.

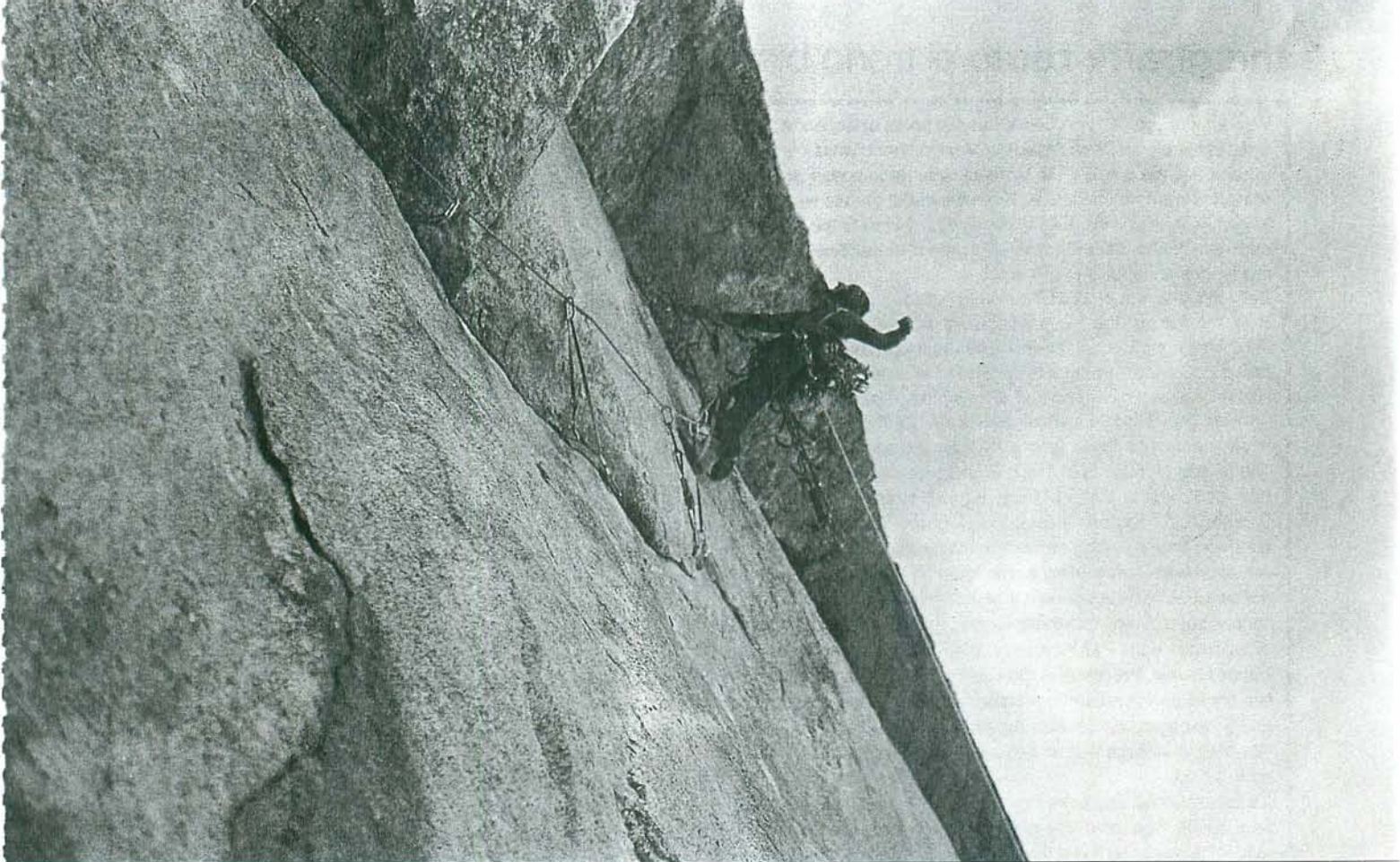
'That technique, climbing fast, only applies in places like Yosemite where you've got a lot of fixed gear and fixed anchors,' he says. 'To do the really big wall challenges elsewhere, like in Patagonia, Baffin Island and Pakistan, it helps to be able to climb eighteen or twenty hours at a time but using fixed gear just doesn't apply.'

Also, on Great Trango, Middendorf and Bongard climbed 'capsule' style, running out fixed ropes from one hanging camp before moving all the kit up the ropes to the next. They were committed to the wall on the first day.

'That's what I've been training for, routes like that in the big mountains,' he says. 'It's like Chouinard said about taking he tactics used in Yosemite elsewhere, something that hasn't been done that much.'

While Middendorf has mixed views on retro-bolting of established wall routes, he adamantly opposes sieging, extensive artificial aid placements and similar tactics, as well as the use of power drills.

'The Nose has been rap bolted now, from the top by Brooke Sandahl, but that doesn't seem to bother me too much. There's other places, like the first pitches of New Jersey Turnpike, which were A4 – serious stuff. Dave Schultz was trying to free them so he's put a lot of bolts in and has taken a lot of the excitement out of it. I draw the line on something like Sea of Dreams. Some people went up and bolted every belay. When Bridwell put that up, he was trying



MIDDENDORF COLLECTION

to make not only the pitches difficult but the belays technically difficult to set up as well. It's like Bonatti said, bolts are the murder of the impossible.'

Bolts added to the Kali Yuga by Bill Russell and Pete Takeda during the first ascent of their new route the Vodka Putsch which joins the last leads of Kali, upset Middendorf:

'They added over 25 holes,' says Middendorf. 'They bolted around this flake that Walt freed, but the worst tragedy is that the last pitch – which Walt led – went completely no holes and it overhung possibly 50 feet in 75 of climbing. It was sketchy A3 pins in these horizontal layers. It was really strenuous and really awkward. It was a masterpiece. They shouldn't have been on it. They should have done some other variation where they could've drilled their way up.'

Takeda defends himself by saying he drilled only one bathook placement. Russell did add numerous rivets but was unavailable for comment.

'I have a pretty clear conscience as to what I did,' said Takeda, adding that he was not leading or calling the shots when the rivets were added. 'I can't speak for anybody else.'

Chiselled head placements are the other major Yosemite trend that Middendorf doesn't like. While he admits his new route Flight of the Albatross on El Capitan has about half a dozen chiselled head placements, it's a technique Middendorf has used only twice, only in recent years and doesn't endorse.

'The reason I have a problem with them' he says, 'is that they are easiest for the first ascent team. And then it gets

**Above: Middendorf leading during his ascent last year of the Giraffe route on El Trono Blanco – see over.**

trashed for subsequent ascents. Manufactured difficult aid climbing is just bullshit. Obviously you can take any section of blank rock and chisel head and hook placements and make it as hard as you want. The name of the game is to find the natural A5 climbing without altering the rock. I think that's what all climbing's all about – seeking natural lines.'

Great Trango, incidentally, averages fewer drilled holes per foot than most 'natural' lines – including some of Royal Robbins' routes – in Yosemite.

'He's really gone a long way with that Trango Tower route,' says Shipley. 'He's really accelerated out of the norm.'

'A great achievement,' adds Bridwell. 'One of the best achievements in the last decade. It ranks up there with the south face of Cerro Torre. And the style was impeccable.'

'But,' Bridwell continues, 'the thing I like about him the most – and I don't give a damn about how he climbs – is he's a really nice person. Real honest, too.'

Bridwell's comments point to something perhaps even more legendary than Middendorf's ability to beak it out on desperate A5 horror shows – his personality.

'Has anyone told you John's a really generous guy?' Shipley asks. Nearly every climber's first comment for this article concerns Middendorf's generosity.

'God bless John,' says longtime friend Steve Bosque. 'He's one guy who really deserves it.' ■



# the giraffe route el trono blanco, mexico

Without a doubt, North America has the finest selection of big walls in the world. From Alaska to Mexico, these walls encompass the extremes in terms of size, remoteness, and prevalent weather conditions. From the idyllic granite walls of Yosemite to the flawless sandstone cliffs of Zion to the bizarre and intimidating Black Canyon, all levels of commitment and challenges abound.

Early in the winter of 1993, I travelled with Jeff Hollenbaugh to Baja, Mexico and the 1,600-foot granite wall of El Trono Blanco – pictured right. Except for an ancient article by Scott Baxter called Poor Man's Patagonia, published in *Climbing* in 1974, little information has appeared on this area. Actually called Canyon Tajo, it is like a smaller version of Joshua Tree with many great crags found among the granular exfoliating domes. The largest of these is El Trono Blanco, which extends into the Laguna Salada valley and whose big wall faces away from Canyon Tajo, requiring a careful exploratory-type drive into the area, and then a hellish descent to the base of the wall.

Jeff and I were considering a new route on the face, although neither of us had ever seen it. I had sketchy information from various people, several widely varying maps, and topos of some of the routes – the Pan American, the South Face, and the Happy Hooker. We knew of the Giraffe only from a speculative line drawn on the photo from Baxter's article from someone who had once attempted the Pan Am route, and that John Long, Billy Westbay, and Hugh Burton had established it sometime in the early 1970s.

It took us two full day's driving on rough 4WD roads to find the area, which required many miles of wandering lost on unmarked roads. Our maps, at least a decade old, were of no use, as they



MIDDENDORF

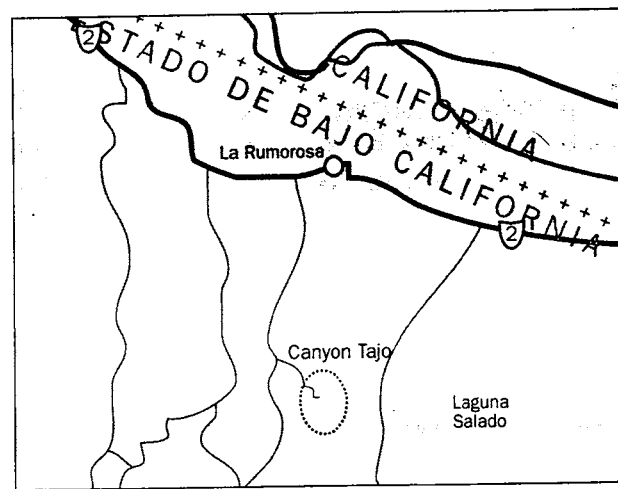
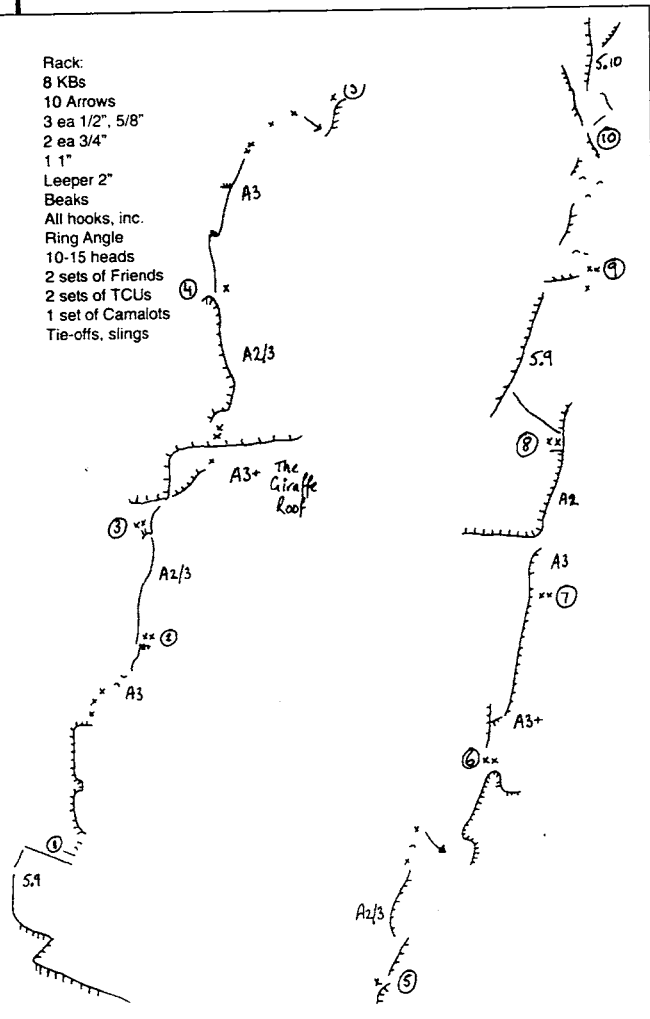
referred to non-existent roads and signs, and long-changed temporal features like 'fence' and 'burned-out area'. After solving the puzzle and finding the domes, the approach to the base was just as much a mystery, and after picking one of many gullies just because it 'felt right', we loaded up our gear and provisions for five days and went for it.

The descent was hell on Earth. It requires wicked bushwhacking down vertical gullies thrashing around in a maze of monster-sized boulders, with huge cliff drop-offs encountered at every turn. Each section of the way had to be first explored without the mondo haulbags.

After a full day of thrashing, we made it, luckily finding water there, and scoped out the routes for the first time. The Pan American is an obvious corner system up the centre of the face. It looks like it will eventually go all free. The Giraffe is on the left and steeper side of the wall, and is the only viable line on the east face of El Trono Blanco, standing alone in a sea of granite. We abandoned plans for a new route for an ascent of the Giraffe.

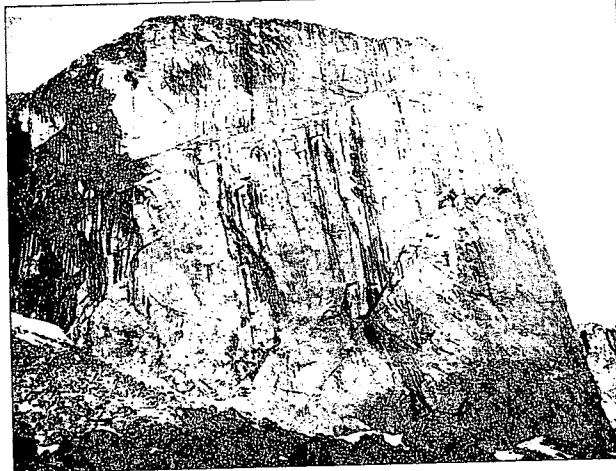
Each pitch of the route is excellent nailing, generally difficult – A3 and harder – and goes through some spectacular features and roofs. We were amazed at how the natural features linked up to produce a continuous route. Below the top, as I was leading an aid corner that was becoming progressively more and more awkward and was leading into a wet and ugly section, I was about to yell to Jeff that we finally had a stinker pitch when I was suddenly able to step around the corner on a thank-god, horizontal ledge to moderate free climbing. The moment typified the climbing on the Giraffe – intimidating and improbable from afar, but all there up close. When we finally escaped, the non-stop adventure of the past week was soon celebrated with some fine Mexican beers.

- Rack:  
 8 KBs  
 10 Arrows  
 3 ea 1/2", 5/8"  
 2 ea 3/4"  
 1 1"  
 Leeper 2"  
 Beaks  
 All hooks, inc.  
 Ring Angle  
 10-15 heads  
 2 sets of Friends  
 2 sets of TCUs  
 1 set of Camalots  
 Tie-offs, slings



Mt Hooker is the premier big-wall monolith in Wyoming's Wind River range, with a 1,800-foot, just-off-vertical north face. The granite in the Winds is often well featured, allowing for classic long free routes, but the north face proper of Mt Hooker is largely steep and split only by a few cracks. The wall now has four big-wall routes on the main part of the north face. The Robbins Route – now all free – takes a line on the north-west edge of the monolith, and a shorter free route takes a line up the far left side of the north face. Steve Quinlan is the expert on this aspect of Mt Hooker, with a new solo route, a repeat of one of the other lines, and countless other attempts on the wall spread out over a period of twelve years. He and I had climbed some routes in Yosemite, and as he is a summertime guide in the nearby Tetons, he suggested that I come up to climb a new route he had picked out. In 1991 we attempted the line, only to be beaten off by a wicked snowstorm. The Wind Rivers has a short season in July and August, the other months being uninhabitable, let alone climbable. We were banking on having a short period of nice weather in early September, between the summer rains and winter, which begins in early to mid-September. Our second attempt the next year was foiled again by the onset of winter, with three feet of fresh snow dropped on us after weathering out a two-day storm on the wall.

Each year we got our ropes a little higher – two pitches the first year, and to the top of pitch four the second. Each two-week expedition to the remote Mt Hooker required extensive planning, a twenty-mile hike with horses, establishing ourselves on the wall and the forced retreat, followed by a tedious hike out with 90lb loads. This summer we wisened up, going in a little earlier during mid-August despite the rains. We hiked in with our horse-

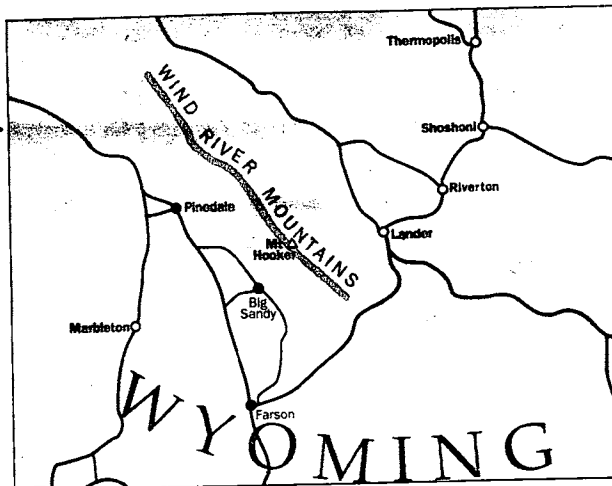
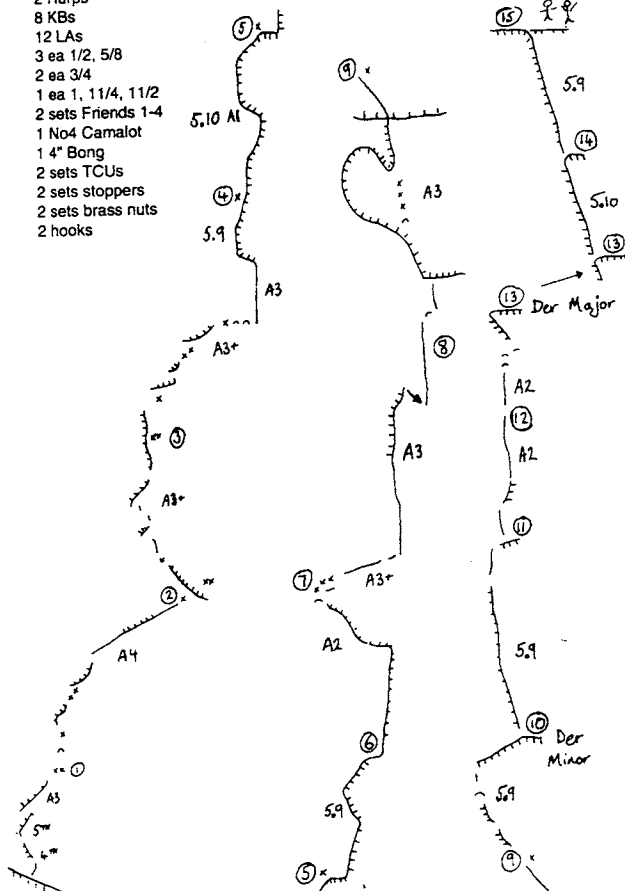


Above: Hooker's north face. The 'eye' is a roof near the skyline at two-thirds height.

packing guide and three horses which we hired for \$150 at Big Sandy Lodge, humped our 200lb of equipment over Haley Pass to base camp, and got organised in poor weather. Our timing was perfect. As soon as we had established base, the weather cleared, and except for a few slight showerings, we had perfect weather for the next five days. The weather crapped out again as we were hiking out. Our ropes had been trashed during the winter, and we debated heavily over reascending the hard-earned and difficult (A4) initial pitches of the route. We decided to jumarc the tattered ropes, though we could see that the sheaths were fully cut in many spots. We had left two lines fixed on the lowest section. One of these was cut, and the other was shredded and hooked on a flake off to the side. Steve jumarced up to the flake, placed a belay, and while untangling the mess of shredded ropes above (whereupon one just fell free), discovered that he had been jumarcing on a rope anchored solely by being jammed in a flake. The next jumarc was mine, and required ascending a completely shredded core – the sheath had long been reduced to nothing – for 200 core-squeaking feet. The climbing above our fixed ropes was generally moderate, the crux being a roof which Steve led through a huge eye-shaped feature which we named the route after. Above the roof, which is at about two-thirds height, the route went mostly free on excellent rock – a fine alpine big wall in a remote location.

**Difficulty:** 5.10, A4, 3 days were required for the final ascent with four pitches fixed.

- Rack:  
 3 Beaks  
 2 Rurps  
 8 KBs  
 12 LAs  
 3 ea 1/2, 5/8  
 2 ea 3/4  
 1 ea 1, 1 1/4, 1 1/2  
 2 sets Friends 1-4  
 1 No4 Camalot  
 1 4" Bong  
 2 sets TCUs  
 2 sets stoppers  
 2 sets brass nuts  
 2 hooks



# flight of the albatross el capitan, yosemite

I had pieced this route together over years of scoping out sections. In the mid 1980s, I had seen the middle part, 450 feet of good cracks rising from Grey Ledges well into the Shield Headwall, to where it blanks out for 220 feet. Several pitches below Chickenhead ledge – 500 feet below the summit – a huge canoe-shaped flake which seemed to defy gravity was attached to the headwall, and from there, a clearly visible crack went to Chickenhead Ledge. When I climbed the Salathé for the second time just prior to this ascent, I saw a 500-foot crack system which was not part of any other route splitting the centre of the

Will dropped my Swiss army knife the first night from Heart Ledge, and I went into a foul mood. The pitches from Heart to Grey were largely filled with dirt and mud, making for some unpleasant A1 climbing. At Grey Ledges, we were hit by a raging storm for about eighteen hours, and we got soaked in our low angle, ledgeless location at the top of Greys. We still had enough ropes to fix down to the Mammoth Terrace, where we suspected we would still find some other party's fixed ropes to the ground. Luckily we had a small espresso maker and stove to allow us a diversion from the cold, soaked conditions, otherwise we may have bailed. While we were getting hammered by the storm, huddled in our portaledge, we envied the team above us on the Shield Headwall who were not even using their portaledge rainfly, due to the overhanging wall above.

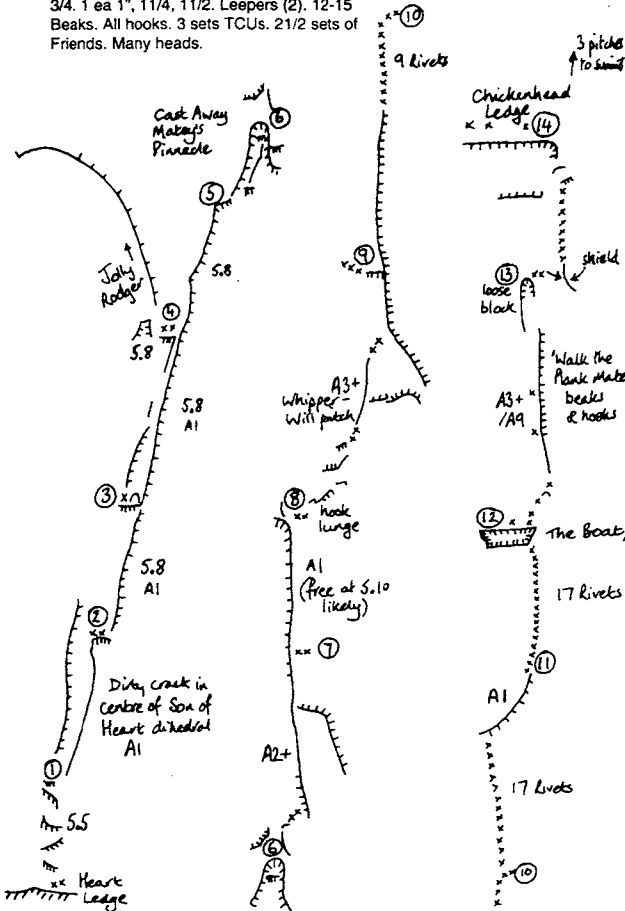
Above Grey, the climbing got steeper and more difficult. One of the pitches was a superb Wheat Thin type flake, which is mostly invisible from the ground because of its profile. Will then led a hard and steep A3+ pitch which took us onto the Shield Headwall proper. The pitch, which we named the 'Whipper Will', overhung about 50 feet in all. From there an A2 lost arrow crack led to the sea of blankness on the headwall. We drilled for 100 feet, climbed a 40 foot flake, and drilled for 80 more feet to the Canoe, the huge detached flake resting on a sloping stance up there. This was a perfect bivouac – flat, two feet wide, and 40 feet long, though I made the mistake of hammering a pin behind it as part of the belay. After a few hits, the entire block – which must have weighed fifteen tons – shifted a bit. We left the pin without cleaning it. Above the Canoe, a thin A3+ or A4 seam continued up, requiring many beaks and No1 and No2 copperheads. The dangerous ledge fall on this pitch precludes this route from becoming an immediate classic, but besides this and the Whipper Will pitch, all the climbing was of moderate difficulty. In unsettled weather, we finished from Chickenhead on the Shield, regretting later that we did not do an obvious direct finish to the right. The direct finish is recommended for subsequent ascents of this fine route up El Cap.

**Difficulty:** 5.10, A3+/A4, seven days spent of the first ascent.

Will Oxx on the 'Whipper Will' pitch of Flight of the Albatross



Rack: 10KB. 15 LA. 3-4 ea 1/2, 5/8. 2-3 ea 3/4. 1 ea 1", 1 1/4, 1 1/2. Leepers (2). 12-15 Beaks. All hooks. 3 sets TCUs. 2 1/2 sets of Friends. Many heads.



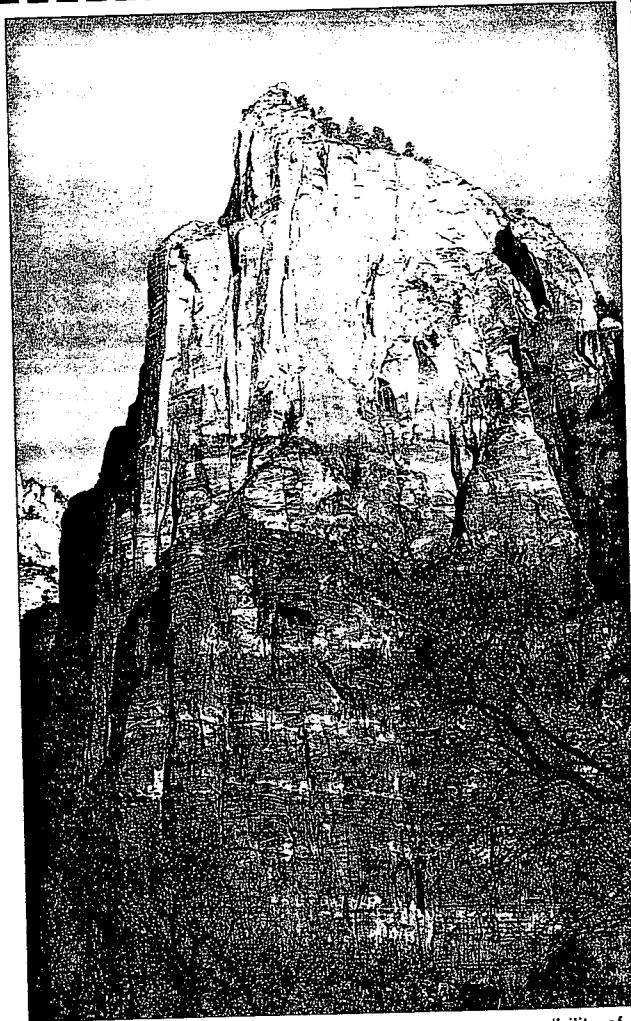
100-foot-wide dihedral which forms the bottom part of the famous Heart formation on El Cap. Final observation with a telescope revealed a flake system spitting the blank section on the Shield headwall. All in all, it turned out to be 180 feet of blank rock requiring rivet ladders in 1,400 feet of new climbing. El Capitan, with over 60 routes and variations, is so criss-crossed with lines that it is hard to imagine squeezing more in without extensive drilling, and since the last really good lines were bagged in the late 1980s, new routes have required more and more drilling through large blank sections to link natural features. Many new routes on El Capitan have required over 100 holes to complete, though many have required fewer – the Atlantic Ocean Wall, for example, required 58 new holes for bolts and rivets. I estimated that we could do this new route with less than 75 holes total, so my ethical reservations were resolved.

Will Oxx and I began in fine spring weather, fixing up to Heart Ledges and hauling gear up. Like most big wall routes, this one had its most difficult moments getting started the first few days.

BILL HATCHER

Also in the spring of 1993, Brad Quinn, the photographer Bill Hatcher and I climbed a new 1,800-foot big wall route on Isaac, the centre Patriarch in Zion National Park. Zion is host to many great sandstone walls, ranging from 800 to 2,200 feet and spring is one of the best seasons, before the searing heat of summer, though the spring rains can often be a problem. In fact, we were rained off the route several times before the ascent. The route is split by a huge football-field-sized meadow halfway up. Because of being chased off by the rains, we ended up fixing ropes on much of the lower part, which climbed difficult off-widths and chimneys. On our final push, we were able to collect firewood on the midway ledge, and build a nice fire and drank Jack Daniels from a hospital IV bottle during the bivouac. Above the midway ledge, a splitter 800 foot crack system pierced the slightly overhanging and mostly flawless buttress above. Unfortunately, the lower 250 feet of the crack was knifeblade thickness, precluding free climbing. As an alternative, we climbed two full-length pitches left of the main splitter, one pitch of 5.10+ offwidth, and one pitch of 5.10+ overhanging hand and finger crack. Then we drilled several bolts to the right, pendulumed 80 feet back down and right, and joined the main crack 50 feet below where it opened up to finger size. After aiding at A2 for 60 feet, the crack opened up for free climbing and some spectacular pitches in a big-wall environment were had by all. We bivouacked amid snow on the summit, and descended the next day, which was an adventure in canyoning in itself.

The route is likely to become an all-clean and possibly all-free route as the remaining 60 feet gets nailed a few more times. Like all sandstone nailing routes, the character of the route



changes rapidly with hammer ascents. It is the responsibility of climbers to be aware of the rock destruction caused by pitons and do their best to 'scar constructively' - that is, only clean pitons in an upward direction so stopper placements can eventually be had. With due care and attention by both leader and cleaner of the aid pitch, this route could go all clean with one or two more nailing ascents.

**Difficulty:** 5.10+, A2 (only 60 feet of aid on the whole route). Five days were required for the first ascent with one bivouac on the final push.

