

7000 foot wall.

"Big wall climbing isn't for everybody," says John Middendorf as if the chundering masses were lining up at the base of El Capitan, or Half Dome, or the Great Trango Tower, for a chance to spend a week or two living on the one-false-move-and-you-die vertical, working like hod carriers in heat storm or blizzard, cowering as avalanche and rock fall rumble past, eating dinner out of cans, sleeping on a hanging cot that resembles nothing so much as the stretcher they will use to carry your lifeless body from the base of the cliff if your gear or the rock itself gives up on you. "But if you do like it," says Middendorf, who has spent, altogether, something like a year of days on great walls all over the world, "It becomes an addiction."

I couldn't help thinking, as the two of us stood in Zion's Court of the Patriarchs looking two-thousand feet straight up these nearly blank sandstone faces, that it wouldn't take a twelve step program to treat this habit. One step would probably do it. "We ran out of water on that one," he said pointing out the line he'd blazed in the first ascent of the wall called Abraham. "It was in the hundreds up there. That was about the thirstiest I've ever been...except maybe the time on El Cap's Nose route where we took two days of water for what turned out to be a three day climb."

Middendorf's obsession with big walls began on his first visits to Yosemite which began when he was 17 years old, and continued through his college years at Stanford. That was the early 80's and not many climbers were braving the multi-day aid climbs of the big rock near the road (El Capitan), or the little rock in the woods (Half Dome). There were a few routes on both put up by Salathe, Steck, Harding, and a few other of the big wall pioneers who had assaulted the sheer monuments by siege: a technique by which they climbed and set protection to the highest point they could reach in a day, then retreated to the flats for the evening and returned later to take up where they had left off. For Middendorf, an honors engineering student, a tournament-rated chess player, a computer wizard, a juggler and tight-rope walker, the challenge was to take these famous faces in a single alpine push that would keep him on the wall--no matter what--for as long as it took to get to the top.

By now, the 35 year old Middendorf--6'2", 175 lbs., mostly muscle that lays on his bones like hawsers--has climbed something like 100 big walls, and has watched this no-forgiveness kind of rock climbing grow to a new and surprising popularity. There are, he estimates, over a thousand active big wall climbers in America today, most of them sleeping in the hanging tents called Porta-LEDGES which his company, A5 Adventures, manufactures in a small Flagstaff factory. Middendorf runs the enterprise from his home in Hurricane Utah, near Zion, which is where we met for a Q and A about life on the vertical.

Q. In the book you co-authored with John Long, he calls big wall

climbing "The theater of doom...." Exaggeration?

A. Well, John loves hyperbole; not that there isn't some truth in that phrase. I'd say it's definitely the most demanding kind of climbing because it combines every element of the sport. You need the agility of a sport climber, the path finding sense that goes into traditional climbing, the technical savvy for rope handling and hardware placement, and the survival skills to handle whatever nature throws at you up there."

Q. What's the worst nature has thrown at you?

A. Half Dome, March, 1986. Mike Corbett, Steve Boskey and I were a thousand feet up, about half-way to the top. We'd been climbing for four days when one of the worst storms ever to hit Yosemite swept in with incredible winds and rain that came down the rock in a four-inch deep river. It pounded us all day--like we were camped under Vernal falls--then turned to hail, everything froze, then it became a total blizzard. That went on for 48 hours, during which we ran out of food. All we could do was huddle in our portaledge, in our sleeping bags which were frozen blocks of ice, and try to keep from falling asleep.

Q. Did you think about the dead you'd recovered from situations like this while you were on the Yosemite rescue team?

A. Not really. Thinking about it now, I do have a vivid memory of recovering the bodies of three Japanese climbers from the Nose route on El Cap, standing about 15 feet away as the helicopter lifted them slowly off the rock, seeing icicles hanging from their ears and noses. But up there on Half dome, all I could think about was my family and friends and how important it was to stay alive. It took tremendous focus and effort just to keep my fingers and toes moving because when you get that cold all you really want to do is doze off. It's as if your body realizes it's all over and you drift into this dreamy state where you actually start to feel warm. It's really a very pleasant feeling, and it takes a lot of discipline to say no, I don't want to be in this dreamy place, I want to be suffering and shivering.

Q. How close do you think you came to death?

A. Well, the storm broke for about six hours which turned out to be the rescue window. Without that break we wouldn't have lasted another day. As it was, Warner Braun hiked six miles through chest deep snow to the base of the wall, saw us up there and called for a helicopter. They plucked us off one at a time. I was last and because the storm was closing back in so the chopper had to abort the first pass. I remember watching him fly off, sinking into total despair, thinking that the elements had got me after all, that I was doomed to be frozen spectacle on Half Dome.

Q. You actually quit the big walls for three and a half years after that, didn't you?

A. I did. Mostly out of new found fear. Up to then, I thought I had the big walls wired, then zang, this total body slap, and I realized that no matter how wired you think you have it there is always a higher power who can play the cards in a way that can snuff you. When I finally did go back for a Half Dome route with Walt Shipley, I was in fear the whole way. I remember jumaring up the rope knowing I was committing to eight days up there, a storm coming in, wondering why the hell I was getting back into this craziness.

Q. Why the hell were you?


A. I'm not sure. It's just that these big walls have this inexplicable pull over me. During the time I wasn't climbing them, I'd see pictures of the great faces and think, Your life isn't going to be complete unless you go back up there. It's a strange magnetism. Some people get it and some people don't. Most of the time I can't understand why anybody else would want to do it. It's like watching somebody get into heroin.

Q. What kind of people are candidates for this kind of life on the vertical.

A. I think you have to be technically minded, you have to be able to work very long, very hard day, and you have to have strong problem solving abilities. In some ways, it reminds me of chess because, to be good at it, you have to be able to think three moves ahead. Your pieces are your hardware, your rope, bivi gear, food and water. The opponent is the ever changing nature of the rock and the weather. And just like chess, you make one dumb mistake and the game's over.

Q. You did your most famous climb with Xaver Bongard, a first ascent of the face on The Great Trango Tower in Pakistan's Karkoram. Was that your longest climb?

A. Yes. Longest, hardest, proudest. It took three weeks to plan and organize the logistics, five days to hike to the base, then 18 days on the wall to climb 5,000 feet. We slept days and climbed at night because of the constant avalanches that came down on us in chunks the size of VW busses. ~~That was the worst~~ ^{Some} ^{names} fear I've ever had, uncontrolled fear...hugging the rock and listening to the awful rumble from above bearing down on us over and over again. We would have quit if we hadn't been totally committed to the project. In a way, you have to write yourself off before starting a climb like that. Both of us were totally willing to die in the attempt. Which isn't to say we were morose about it. Our energy was so good together. We laughed and joked and kept each other going. Xaver had a great sense of humor which is the most important trait a partner can have. Things always go wrong on a big climb and there's a natural tendency to blame the other guy, so if you can't laugh you're in a lot of trouble.



been lucky with my partnerships. But I've heard it get pretty bad up there. Like the time on El Cap, two guys bailing off a route near me, and one of them yelled, "Off rapel...ASSHOLE." It can be hell if you're with the wrong person.

Q. What kind of loads do you haul?

A. Depends. If you're doing the nose in a day you can get away with a rope and a rack and the shirt on your back. On Trango, we took 80 lbs of climbing gear, 50 lbs. of bivi gear, 100 lbs. of food and about 150 lbs of water in the form of a barrel full of ice that we melted as needed.

Q. How do you estimate what you'll need on a long climb?

A. That's actually one of the most stressful parts of the climb, because once you're up, if you've forgotten something you have to do without it. There are no stores up there. You don't want to drop anything, either. I almost lost one of my gloves on Trango. I had it clipped into the wrong thing. That would have cost me some fingers, or worse.

Q. What was it like on the summit of Trango at 20,444 feet?

A. A feeling of satisfaction so intense that I'm sure I don't even remember it now. Just to be alive after that climb was so amazing. When people ask me why I climb I usually tell them it for the view, and the view from that summit--K2, Gershabaum IV, the ~~lost~~ ^{nameless} Trango Tower--was overwhelming. Gasherbrum

Q. What did it feel like standing at the base again, looking up at what you'd done?

A. Well, by that time the wall had taken on a persona for us. It was like we were saying goodbye to this great ogre who had held us in his clutches for three weeks. The post-wall blues hit on the hike out. For four months we'd had this single goal on which to focus our energies. Then all of a sudden you're back to ordinary life in which goals are never that pure or powerful. A hole comes into your life, a feeling that you've lost direction.

Q. Do you have to like suffering to like this kind of climbing.

A. Like it, I don't know. But you do have to be ready to suffer. Not that it's all bad, by any means. I've had my best moments on big walls. Small moments, like at the end of a hard day when you've accomplished what you set out to do...then finding that cigarette you didn't think you had. Actually, I think the real reason I climb is for the small moments of pure happiness.

Q. Spiritual moments?

A. Oh, yes. My deepest spiritual feelings have come on big walls. Sometimes you're at a belay staring off into space and you feel the strange and proverbial oneness with the cosmos that put you

at peace. They come randomly, they're fleeting, and as soon as you realize you're having one they disappear. I think they're triggered when you've overcome the self doubt and fear always that come along with you as you try to answer the question "Can this be done?"

Q. Did you question your life on the edge when Xaver was killed in a base jump near his home in Switzerland?

A. It did make me ponder the roots of desire that makes someone want to push the limits. And I did lament, deeply, the futility of his death. At the same time, it was his way, it was what he chose. If you'd taken it away from him it would have diminished his life.

Q. What's next for you?

A. Baffin Island this summer to climb some of the Clyde River walls, a series of beautiful, remote three and four-thousand foot faces. Then India, the Garwhal region to try for routes on Meru and Bhagirathi, a couple of walls that will probably take five to fifteen days each. I won't necessarily be trying to top what Xaver and I did on Trango. I'm getting a little old for one thing. But I'd really like to see other climbers push the standard, on the big walls on the 8000 meter peaks, maybe.

Q. Can you give us ^{here's some} ^{undiscovered} ^{big walls on a few of the} three points of wisdom for those who might be thinking about stepping up to big wall climbing?

A. Number one: Never climb with anyone who's sense of humor is weaker than your own.

Number two: Never let go of anything that isn't clipped to an anchor.

Number three: Remember that for every pound of gear you haul, you leave 11 pounds of ordinary, everyday trouble below.