# Cerro Torre—
# The Eleventh Failure

LEO DICKINSON, *Alpine Climbing Group*

IT would now seem possible that eleven expeditions have failed to reach the elusive summit of Cerro Torre. The only one not proven to be a failure is Maestri's original north face route with Toni Egger. After having spoken to Maestri about his 1959 route I now believe that no one alive will ever know whether or not they did in fact reach the true summit of Cerro Torre. Maestri has been questioned and has repeated his story so many times—his recollections are vague and hold memories centered around the tragic death of Egger to such an extent that whether or not he did climb it is now irrelevant—he has convinced himself.

Because of the doubters Maestri returned in 1970, climbing the mountain with a pneumatic bolt gun, but in so doing brought down a torrent of criticism and scorn. On Maestri's own admission he only reached the plateau at the top of the headwall, ignoring the final 200 feet of icy mushroom that marks the true summit; he dismissed it simply with, "Its just a lump of ice, not really part of the mountain—it'll blow away one of these days." I have photographs showing granite at least 100 feet higher than the plateau that Maestri reached—so whether the *rock* summit is accepted as being the true summit or the icy mushrooms maybe 50 feet higher—Maestri DID NOT reach the highest point of Cerro Torre on his last expedition . . . and surely this is accepted convention.

Our expedition left England in November, 1971. Three weeks later we were on the way up to the southeast ridge and "Col of Patience." Hans Peter Trachsel made an ice cave on lines similar to those he had been taught in the Swiss Army. There were two rooms—a kitchen and sleeping shelf. This was generally stocked with luxuries as these seemed more palatable. On the day after Boxing Day we started our assault on the tower. First there was a chimney full of snow and ice leading up to an old rope traverse reminiscent of the Hinterstoisser on the Eiger. But this was the "Traverse of Return"— for Hinterstoisser would never have pulled across his ropes. We were as yo-yos—each crossing and recrossing the fixed handrail a dozen times throughout the expedition.

Above were two more rock pitches reaching to the top of the first tower. Then snow arêtes, slabs, chimneys, more snow until strangely

a slab studded with bolts. My first impression was to take a photograph of them. I took out my camera and was surprised to find that I could operate it with both hands simply by standing upright on this easy angled slab! This forboded ill, for on the now steeper rocks above and sure enough, across a completely blank and totally unclimbable wall, were Maestri's bolts.

We had not intended to use these at all for we were led to believe that only the final headwall was laddered. In front of us now loomed a piece of ice weighing perhaps ten tons and impossible to climb, for it didn't really appear to be attached to the mountain, save for the old tattered ropes emerging at the top.

Amongst discussion, debate, argument and frustration we crossed the 400-foot bolt ladder. Mercifully, at the other side, the bolts disappeared and chimneys emerged similar but harder than the "Exit Cracks" of the Eiger. Here there were no bolts and so the climbing improved. Above was another bolt ladder—this time only 60 feet high but by now the rot had set in—there seemed no further point in pegging an A1 pitch two metres to the left.

Hans led up a steep pitch which Eric Jones thought contained some of the hardest climbing he had ever done. Whatever did Maestri do here? The following day the three of us were replaced by Cliff Phillips and Gordon Hibberd. They pushed up further into the ice towers.

When they were only 40 feet from the headwall, with Maestri's line of bolts disappearing upwards into the mists, the clouds closed in. This was the last time at our high point. For 40 days the winds reminded us of the Patagonian legends of the land of tempest. On our return the ropes were destroyed; the winds had won. It was summer's end—Lionel Terray was right.

*Summary of Statistics:*

AREA: Patagonia, near the Chilean-Argentine Border.

ATTEMPTED CLIMB: Southeast ridge of Cerro Torre, November 1971 to February 1972.

PERSONNEL: Eric Jones, Cliff Phillips, Hans Peter Trachsel, Gordon Hibberd, Peter Minks, Leo Dickinson.

*Editor's Note:* The reader will find fascinating an interview with Cesare Maestri found in *Mountain* of September 1972. This also includes other interesting material about Cerro Torre.