

El Capitan

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I suppose this article could be titled "The Conquest of El Capitan." However, as I hammered in the last bolt and staggered over the rim, it was not at all clear to me who was conqueror and who was conquered: I do recall that El Cap seemed to be in much better condition than I was.

The above mentioned last bolt marked the conclusion of a venture that began in July, 1957. Mark Powell, Bill "Dolt" Feuerer and I met in Yosemite Valley intending to make an attempt on the North Face of Half Dome. We discovered that an excellent team of climbers from southern California was already at work on it and had the situation well in hand. In our disappointment, we became a bit rash and decided to "have a go" at El Cap.

I'm sure no climber ever considered El Cap impossible—the term "impossible climb" having long since become obsolete. The fact that, previously, there had been no serious attempts to scale the sheer 2900-foot face was simply due to the common belief among rock climbers that techniques were not sufficiently advanced to cope with such a problem.

After we decided to attempt the climb, we spent an entire day studying the face in search of a continuous route to the summit. It is interesting to note that, on the climb, the route went exactly as we planned, with the possible exception of the "Roof Pitch," a formidable-looking overhang about 2000 feet up. I felt it would be best to bypass this obstacle, using a crack somewhat to the east. Later this crack proved to be only a water streak and we were forced to negotiate the "Roof."

It was obvious that existing methods of conducting a sustained rock-climb would be inadequate. Because of the extreme difficulty of the climbing we anticipated slow progress—perhaps no more than 100 to 200 feet a day. We would spend many days on the rock, so reasonably comfortable campsites were a necessity. Unfortunately there appeared to be very few ledges. We agreed unanimously that the only feasible plan of attack would be to establish a succession of camps up the face, linking them with fixed ropes. Supplies would be hauled up from the ground as needed. This would require a support party to assemble and tie loads to our hauling

lines. Throughout the climb, such people as John Whitmer, Cookie Calderwood, Ellen Searby, and Beverley Woolsey contributed much to the success of the climb as they patiently plodded up the talus with loads of food and water. Our technique was to be similar to that used in ascending high mountains, with prusiking and rappelling gear replacing ice axe and crampons as aids for traveling, and winch and hauling lines instead of Sherpas.

On July 4, 1957, we began hammering our way up the smooth, glacier-polished wall. There was no thought of reaching the summit on this attempt—our tentative goal was El Cap Towers, the prominent pinnacles on the east side of the buttress about half way up the face.

On the third day we reached Sickle Ledge, 550 feet up, and established Camp I. The next four days were spent pushing the route upward toward the "Towers." The climbing was almost entirely 6th class, direct aid, and about as difficult as can be imagined. Finally, 150 feet short of the lower tower, we were forced to give up. Our special "stoveleg" pitons which had brought us up 300 feet of the two- to three-inch-wide "Stoveleg Crack" were so battered and flattened that they would no longer hold.

Leaving fixed ropes behind to secure what we had gained, we descended. Reaching the ground, our spirits were somewhat dampened by an unexpected problem. It seemed that our climbing presented quite a spectacle and had attracted a crowd of tourists which created a traffic jam at the road-junction near the base. The park rangers were understandably distressed and we had to agree to stay off the rock during the tourist season, between Memorial Day and Labor Day. This meant we would be climbing with shorter days and less certain weather. Difficulties of the El Capitan ascent were not confined to the rock!

According to our agreement, nothing was done until after Labor Day except to replace the many borrowed climbing ropes left as fixed line with a newly purchased half-inch manila.

Beginning with a four-day tour at Thanksgiving, there was a series of attrition attacks extending through October 1958 which whittled away the remaining 2000 feet to a point from which a final push might stand a chance of success.

The accompanying *Chronology of El Capital, First Ascent* outlines this, but limited space in the "remarks" column prevents adequate description of the troubles and frustrations that plagued us in the next several months. About everything that could go wrong did.

The first, and probably worst, blow was Powell's unfortunate accident. In September 1957, he took a bad fall (while on an easy climb) and frac-

tured and dislocated his ankle, putting himself out of action for a long time, if not permanently. Then, weather in the spring and early fall of 1958 was abominable. New equipment such as the winch, laboriously carted 1200 feet up to "Dolt Tower," was not nearly as effective as it might have been.

Along with the new equipment, new faces appeared on the rock. This, too, posed a problem. Powell and Feuerer felt that no new members should be admitted to the group. I didn't think the three of us constituted a strong enough party to go ahead on El Cap, since Powell, who had climbed brilliantly on the first attempt, was no longer capable of doing much leading. The dissension arising from this situation ultimately resulted in Powell and Feuerer dropping out, except for the continued use of Feuerer's pitons and other special equipment. So I continued with whatever "qualified" climbers I could "con" into this rather unpromising venture.

By mid-October 1958, Camp IV at 1800 feet and a high point at 2000 feet, just below the "Roof," had been established. The Chief Ranger had given us a deadline—to complete the climb by Thanksgiving. I have never understood how this was to have been enforced. But it didn't matter; we were all determined to reach the summit before winter.

After a long, hard look at the remaining 900 feet of the upper face, Wayne Merry, George Whitmore, Rich Calderwood, and I (who now made up the El Cap climbing party) agreed that an all-out effort was in order.

On November 1, 1958 we started up the fixed ropes for what we hoped would be the last time. The weather had cleared and the invigoratingly cool breezes were a pleasant contrast to the violent thunderstorms and oppressive heat of the nine-day effort in September. Due to a late start, we reached Camp IV a little after dark and were soon in our sleeping bags discussing plans for the next day's activities.

Next morning we ascended the fixed line to the previous high point and went to work on the long-dreaded "Roof Pitch." While strenuous and just a bit scary—nailing around the right side of the 180° overhang with 2000 feet of space directly below—it proved to be not nearly as difficult as we had thought it would be. The following seven days blurred into a monotonous grind—if living and working 2500 feet above the ground on a vertical granite face can be considered monotonous! On Sunday evening, the ninth day, a storm broke, providing a welcome day of rest from the hammering and hauling.

While sitting out the storm at Camp VI, snug in our sleeping bags with a rubberized nylon tarp warding off the wind and snow, Wayne and I took stock of the situation. Except for Rich Calderwood, who had gone down with an attack of nerves, we were all in good condition. Whitmore was somewhere below, most likely Camp IV, and would be coming up with another load of food. We had been working out of Camp VI for the past three days and, while we were not certain, we felt that our high point was surely no more than a couple of hundred feet below the rim. A determined push might put us over the top in one more day. We liked the thought, anyway. We were getting just a little tired of the whole thing.

By Tuesday morning the storm had blown itself out. After shouting our plans down to George, Wayne and I left Camp VI with extra food and batteries for our headlamps. Mid-morning found us at our high point and pushing on. As we began nailing up the next pitch, we heard a most welcome sound—a yodel from the top! John Whitmer, Ellen Searby, and Rick Anderson had hiked in to meet us. Spurred on by the encouraging knowledge that we actually were near the rim (because of the intervening overhangs, it had been impossible to see exactly where we were), we hammered up the next two pitches with enthusiasm if not speed. It was nearly 4 o'clock when we reached the tiny ledge that would serve as a belay-spot for the last pitch.

We could now see John and Ellen peering down at us. Also visible was the route between us and the top—a most impressive looking pitch! The first 60 feet was rather straightforward 6th class up a wide crack. The crack ended under an overhanging wall that was 90 feet high and completely devoid of cracks—15 pitons, 28 bolts, and 14 hours were required to surmount that final pitch. But at 6 the next morning I pulled over the top and stared feebly at Ellen as she struggled with her camera's faulty flash-attachment.

NOTES: The ascent took 45 days, spread over a period of 18 months. Although the face is 2900 feet high, so much altitude was lost due to numerous pendulum traverses, that a total of 3400 feet of climbing was necessary. About 675 pitons and 125 expansion bolts were used, 90 percent of which were for direct aid. The mileage of prusiking and rappeling has not been calculated.

CHRONOLOGY OF EL CAPITAN, FIRST ASCENT

Date	Duration		Personnel	Remarks
	Days	Nights		
1957				
<i>July</i>				
5-12	7	5	Powell Harding Feuerer	Began the climb. Camp I, on Sickle Ledge, established. Reached 1050 ft., July 11.
19-20	2	1	Harding Feuerer	Strung 1200 ft. of $\frac{1}{2}$ in. manila rope as fixed line.
25-28	4	3	Harding Steck Feuerer Reed	First night on Sickle Ledge. Next day, on to high point. Gained 60 ft. Bivouacked in slings. Reached summit of Dolt Tower noon of 3rd day. Fourth day spent descending.
1958				
<i>March</i>				
22-23	2	1	Harding Feuerer	Replaced manila fixed line with $\frac{7}{16}$ in. nylon.
30	1	0	Harding Feuerer	Week-long push had been planned, but weather turned bad. Started up, carrying winch and 600-foot and 1200-foot lengths nylon ropes. Turned back at 900 ft. because of rain and snow.
<i>April</i>				
19-20	2	1	Harding Powell Feuerer	Winch and hauling-line carried to Dolt Tower. Winch set up and tested. High point pushed up 60 ft. toward El Cap Towers.
<i>May</i>				
10-11	2	1	Harding Powell Feuerer	Reached El Cap Towers, 1500 ft., first day. Sat out rainstorm that night and part of next day.
24-25	2	1	Harding Powell Feuerer	Last attempt for spring of 1958. High point set at top of Boot Flake, 1650 ft.
<i>Sept.</i>				
6-15	9	8	Harding Merry Calderwood Whitmore Reed Powell	Much time spent hauling food, water, and climbing gear to Dolt Tower and El Cap Towers. Climbing delayed by 2 days of thunder storms and rain. Camp IV established at 1800 ft., high point at 1900 ft.
<i>Oct.</i>				
10-11	2	1	Harding Merry Calderwood Whitmore	Fixed line re-routed between Dolt Tower and Camp IV. High point up 100 ft.—halfway up the Roof Pitch.
17	1	0	Harding Merry Calderwood Whitmore	Turned back at Dolt Tower by threatening weather.
<i>Nov.</i>				
1-12	11	11	Harding Merry Calderwood Whitmore Reed	Final attempt begun Nov. 1. Camp V established Nov. 4. Camp VI established Nov. 6. Summit reached at 6 A.M., Nov. 12.
22-23	2	1	Harding Merry Calderwood Whitmore	Removed fixed lines, supplies, and climbing gear which had been left behind during the ascent.
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Summary of Statistics

AREA: Yosemite National Park, California.

ASCENT: First ascent of the face of El Capitan.

PERSONNEL: Warren J. Harding, Wayne P. Merry, George Whitmore completed the climb. Additional members of final team—Richard Calderwood, John Whitmer, Wallace Reed, Mark Powell. Additional members of preliminary team—William Feuerer, Allen P. Steck. Assistants at base—Cookie Calderwood, Ellen Searby, Beverley Woolsey.

