

The Salathé Wall, El Capitan

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OUR muscles tensed when we heard the air rushing across the rock face. Seconds later we were rudely buffeted by an incredibly strong and ferocious blast of wind. We worried lest our excellent Austrian bivouac sack should tear and leave us completely exposed to the elements. The wind blew in appalling gusts almost continuously, with occasional short periods of dead calm. Rain fell steadily, and whenever the wind died, the natural drainage asserted itself and we received a waterfall directly upon our heads. This tempest had been pounding us for five hours. It was midnight in mid-October, 1962. Tom Frost and I were curled on a long, narrow ledge, 2700 feet up the southwest face of El Capitan, otherwise known as the Salathé Wall.

The reasons for our being in such an unlikely place at such an unlikely hour are connected with an event which occurred on November 12, 1958. On that day Warren Harding, Wayne Merry, and George Whitmore completed the first ascent of the south face of El Capitan. In doing so, they established an elegant and impressive route directly up the Nose of the monolith. They used 3000 feet of fixed ropes, several hundred pitons, 125 bolts, and 45 days of climbing spread over a period of a year and a half. Two years later four young Californians, Joe Fitschen, Tom Frost, Charles Pratt and I, made the second ascent, which, in its own way, was also a major first ascent. It was the first continuous ascent of the route (i.e. no returning to the ground before the ascent is finished), accomplished in seven days. This single-push ascent was made possible through knowledge of the route and utilization of the expansion bolts which had been placed by Harding and his companions.

The Salathé Wall is neatly separated from the southeast face by the Nose of El Capitan which juts boldly into Yosemite Valley. In September, 1961, Chuck Pratt, Tom Frost, and I made the first ascent of the Salathé Wall. This precipice received its name in commemoration of that great pioneer of modern American rock-climbing, John Salathé. Our route starts just 100 feet left of the Nose and traverses west for hundreds of feet to "Hollow Flake Ledge" at the 1100-foot level, whence we ascended in a very direct line to the top of the rock. Although the first ascent of the Nose

had required a prolonged siege with thousands of feet of fixed ropes, we wished to avoid such methods if possible so as to keep the element of adventure high with at least a moderate amount of uncertainty. It was perfectly clear to us that given sufficient time, fixed ropes, bolts and determination, any section of any rock wall could be climbed. To remove this certitude which tends to diminish our joy in climbing, we had planned an attempt involving two major efforts. The first was three-and-a-half days long and took us across the long traverse to "Lung Ledge", 900 feet above our starting point. From here we descended to the ground on fixed ropes and returned several days later for the second stage: an all-out effort to finish the climb. We prusiked up, removed our fixed ropes and went for the top, which we reached after 6 days of the most rewarding climbing we had ever done. Altogether, in nine-and-a-half days of climbing, we placed 484 pitons and 13 bolts.

In September, 1962, with Pratt in the Army, Frost and I returned with T. M. Herbert to attempt a continuous ascent of the wall. Yvon Chouinard and Steve Roper had already attempted such an ascent in the spring of this same year, but after a rapid and auspicious beginning, they were forced to descend because of a badly worn hauling bag.

Since we started rather late in September, we had reason to expect cool weather. However, we suffered considerably from July-like heat during the first two days. Also, I contracted a vague but debilitating sickness, which caused me to feel exhausted after small efforts. By the end of the second day we were settling down for a bivouac on Hollow Flake Ledge, which lies at the end of the traverse, 1100 feet up. Our high point that day had been 1400 feet, 300 feet above our bivouac. The sky had become completely cloudy two hours before nightfall, and as we lay supine and exhausted early in the evening, we implored whatever meteorological deity there might be to send water to restore our desiccated bodies. Whenever a cloud came over which looked as if it might drop some moisture, we opened our mouths and stuck out our tongues, hoping to catch any drops that fell. We need not have bothered, for our prayers were more than answered that evening; indeed, at the risk of impiety I would venture to say the rain god showed a lack of good judgment in the filling of our verbal requisition. A grey wall of cloud advanced toward us. We prepared for the onslaught and were as delighted as children in snow when a very heavy hailstorm began to beat down upon us. In a few minutes three inches of hail had fallen on the ledge and we were shoveling it into our parched mouths as fast as we could swallow. The water began to run down the wall and we ran around, Charlie Chaplin-like, filling our water jugs with what turned out to be an evil liquid, sediment-filled and bad tasting.

Violent and prolonged downpours continued all night and were accompanied by brilliant electrical displays and consequent fulminations which reverberated up and down the valley. It was an exciting, if sleepless night; a night fit for King Lear.

We spent most of the next day, a clear sunny one, sleeping. We were physically spent and in no mood for climbing. T. M. was now suffering from an enervating illness similar to mine, but we thought a day of rest and considerable water might enable us to recuperate sufficiently to finish the climb. Unfortunately, much of the water we had collected was so putrid as to be undrinkable. On the fourth morning we scarcely felt better and descended. This required many hours of cautious and methodical work and involved a long and delicate pendulum from our high point at 1400 feet to regain horizontal distance to Lung Ledge, whence we could rappel to Heart Ledge and so to the ground.

The next attempt to make a continuous ascent occurred in October. T. M. had returned to southern California, and so Tom and I were alone. We were taking a closely calculated risk this time and carrying a minimum of food, water, and equipment. We limited ourselves to thirteen quarts of water, five of which were already on Hollow Flake Ledge from the previous attempt. As the event proved, we could easily have managed on ten quarts, and we were to pour out over two quarts near the top. In addition to the limited amount of water and food, we carried 50 carabiners, 60 pitons, the equivalent of a heavy sweater apiece for warmth, and a marvelously light and durable Sporthaus Schuster bivouac sack. We dispensed with a camera this time and did not carry a bolt kit.

As we started climbing early on October 10, the sky was clear and the temperature cool. There was as yet no sign of the forecasted rain. However, later in the morning, clouds, fragments and clumps of nimbo-stratus, began moving swiftly from the south and it looked as if the Weather Bureau, which had been unsuccessfully forecasting rain for several days, might finally be right. As the clouds scudded over our heads toward the north, Tom skillfully led the difficult section of the blank area where we had placed thirteen bolts the previous year. The use of more bolts in this area had been originally avoided by some enterprising free climbing on two blank sections and some delicate and nerve-wracking piton work. It would take only a few bolts to turn this pitch, one of the most interesting on the route, into a "boring" walk-up.

As the clouds thickened we climbed around the well-known "Half Dollar" and up to Mammoth Terraces, 1000 feet above our starting point. We then climbed down 50 feet and rappelled 150 feet to Heart Ledge, at the base of a large heart-shaped recess which is one of the conspicuous

features of the wall. From Heart Ledge I led the next pitch to Lung Ledge. Following this, Tom made a thrilling pendulum and then struggled up a jam crack for 120 feet to Hollow Flake Ledge. This difficult pitch had been led by T. M. Herbert on the previous attempt. Darkness fell as I followed Tom's lead; rain appeared imminent.

To our surprise, no rain fell that night, though the morning sky on the second day was still mostly cloudy. We had no problem with heat and forced ourselves to drink water to eliminate excess weight. After several hours of mixed free and direct-aid climbing that second morning we reached the "Ear", a large flake which had caused us considerable trouble and delay on the first ascent. We had lost several hours then in a fruitless attempt to bypass this frightening formation, but finally attacked it directly. This involved using chimney technique to move 30 feet horizontally behind the flake, with the bottom of the flake yawning abruptly into space—an unnerving procedure. Tom led this anxiety-producing pitch with nearly perfect composure—only a few screams of terror and moans of horror. I nailed 150 feet to a small ledge, and thence a fiercely difficult jam crack brought us to the base of El Capitan Spire, an 80-foot Lost Arrow-type pinnacle separated from the wall by only a few feet of space. A shower and strong winds hit us here and more of the same seemed certain. We chimneyed to the top of the spire and I then led 75 feet of the next pitch. We spent the night on top of the spire, 1800 feet up. The sky was filled with clouds and a strong wind blew from the south, but again we passed a night without receiving the expected downpour.

The next day brought more of the same weather, which was excellent for climbing: cool, stimulating and though threatening, only threatening. By nightfall of the third day we had climbed 2500 feet and were faced with an important decision. We could rappel 150 feet to a good ledge below and bivouac or we could attempt to continue after dark in an effort to reach "Sous Le Toit Ledge", 60 feet away horizontally and around a large bulge in the face, beyond a long and complicated pitch which includes a pendulum. After mentally weighing the factors we decided to continue climbing—a lucky decision as it turned out. A full moon was shining so brightly that we received considerable light through the clouds and seldom used our single flashlight. We reached "Sous Le Toit Ledge" at 11:30 P.M. and settled down for a chilly bivouac. The weather signs still portended rain or snow. With all these clouds moving in from the Pacific there must be *something* out there. How long would it hold off?

On the morning of the fourth day we ascended a long and interesting pitch to a 20-foot overhang called the "Roof". Surmounting this roof, which was composed of several tiers, each overhanging the one below,

involved some of the most spectacular and strenuous climbing on the route. Above the roof was a 200-foot overhanging headwall. The climbing on this headwall was all direct-aid, very difficult in several spots, and slow. All day, as we climbed, the wind blew in gusts of startling strength. We could see how it passed over the trees below as one normally observes its action on tall grass or a field of wheat. Belaying in slings, we were violently blown this way and that, and the wind's force made it difficult to stand high in our slings to place pitons.

We were both up on "Thank God Ledge" by nightfall, just in time to prepare for the rain, which the wind drove on us all night. Just before dawn a little snow fell on the ledge, while on top of the rock, 300 feet higher, three inches lay on the ground. At daybreak we forced ourselves out of our sack. With considerable effort we ate, and drank a little water. The precipitation had ceased and the storm passed to the southeast. Numbed, we climbed slowly that morning, but by the time we finished the first pitch the sun shone upon us from an almost clear sky. Water ran down the face from the melting snow above and Tom was hit by a piece of ice. The last pitch was a fitting climax to the climb. On the first ascent Chuck Pratt had led this pitch. On that day I was prusiking and hauling, but Tom had followed Chuck's lead and came up sweating, cursing, and praising Chuck's uncommon talents.

We finished the climb in magnificent weather, surely the finest and most exhilaratingly beautiful Sierra day we had ever seen. The air was cool, but the direct sunlight was warm and friendly. All the high country was white with new snow and two or three inches had fallen along the rim of the Valley, on Half Dome, and on Clouds Rest. One could see for great distances and each peak was sharply etched against a dark blue sky. We were feeling spiritually very rich indeed as we hiked down through the grand Sierra forests to the Valley.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Yosemite Valley, California.

ASCENTS: El Capitan, Salathé (Southwest) Wall—First ascent, September 12-15, 1961 (first 900 feet) and September 19-24, 1961 (completed climb) (Frost, Pratt, Robbins).—Second ascent and first continuous climb of the route, October 10-14, 1962 (Frost, Robbins).

PERSONNEL: Thomas Frost, T. M. Herbert, Charles Pratt, Royal Robbins.



PLATE 15

Photos in this section by Edward Cooper

Southwest Face of EL CAPITAN from Lower Cathedral Rock. --- = *Southwest Face Route*: I, II and IIa. hanging bivouacs; III. *The Ledge*; IV. *The Cave*; V. *Thanksgiving Ledge*; VI. final bivouac. = *Salathé Wall*: A. blank area; B. *Half Dollar*; C. *Mammoth Terraces*; D. *Heart Ledge*; E. *Hollow Flake Ledge*; F. *Ear*; G. *El Capitan Spire*; H. *Sous le Toit Ledge*; I. *Roof*; J. *200-foot Headwall*; K. *Thank God Ledge*. -.-.-.- = *The Nose*.

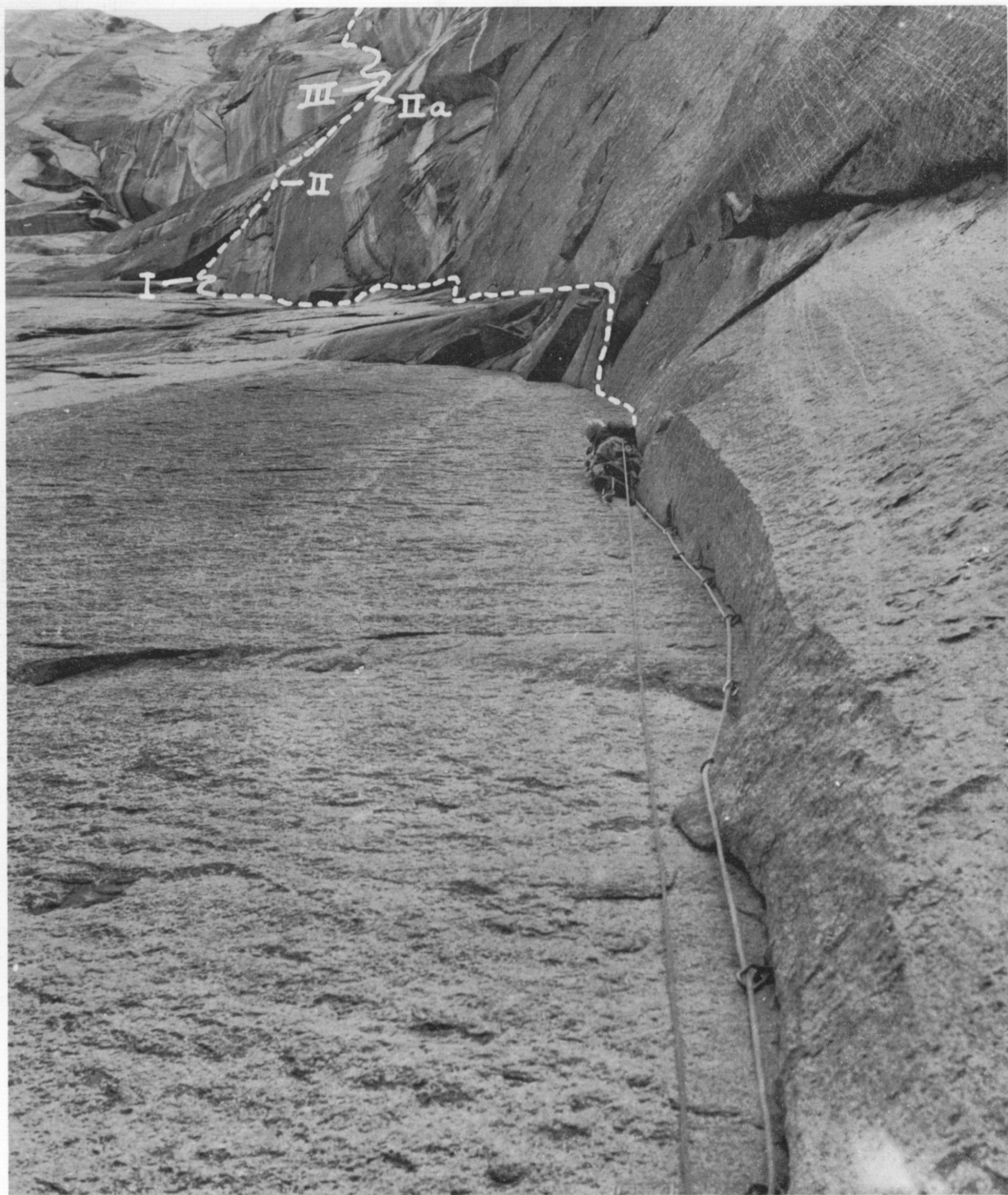


PLATE 16

Looking up second pitch of SOUTHWEST FACE of EL CAPITAN.

PLATE 17

Cooper at start of fixed ropes with EXTRA LOOP in PRUSIK KNOTS used to prevent recurrence of Baldwin's accident.

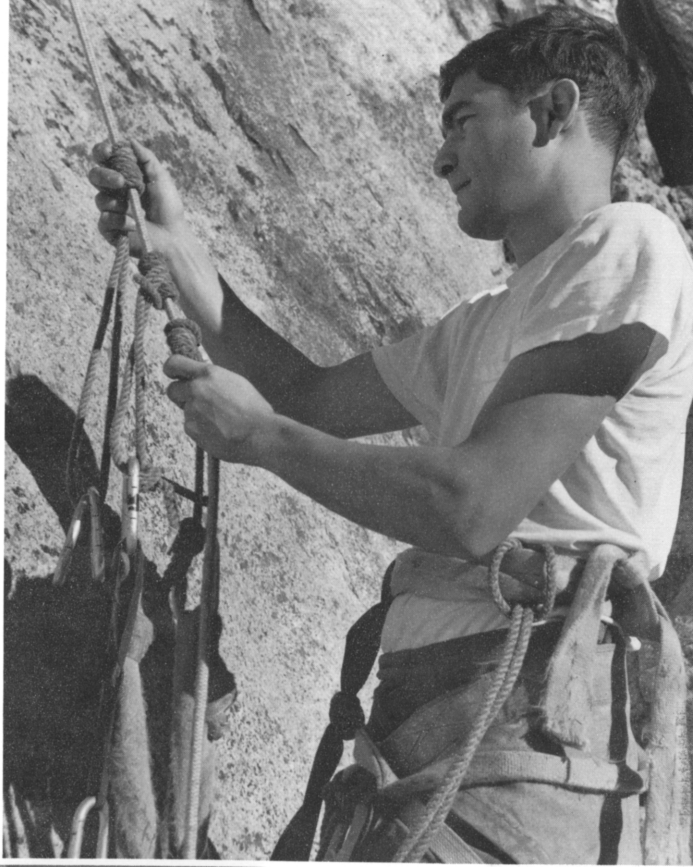


PLATE 18

At about 1650 feet on SOUTH-WEST FACE of EL CAPITAN.

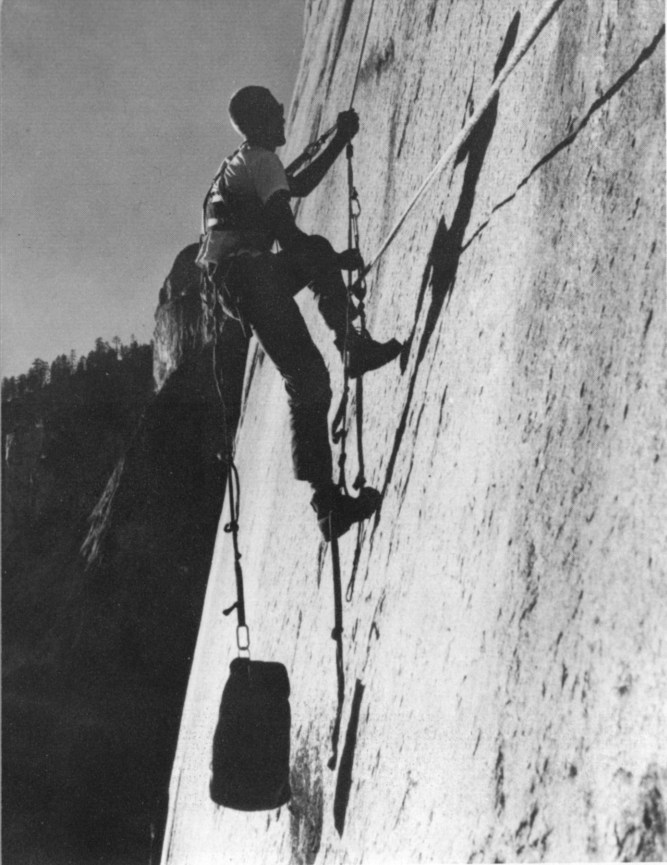


PLATE 19

An UPWARD-SIDEWAYS
PRUSIK at about 500 feet.

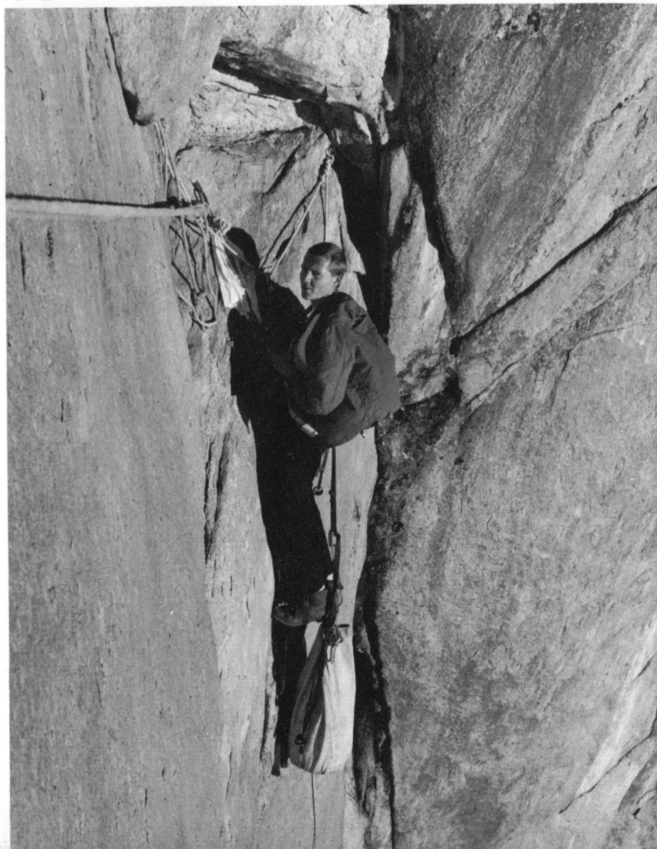


PLATE 20

The fourth HANGING BELAY
at about 500 feet.

PLATE 21

PRUSIKING with LOADS at 700 feet over large overhang, where Jim Baldwin's prusik knots slipped.

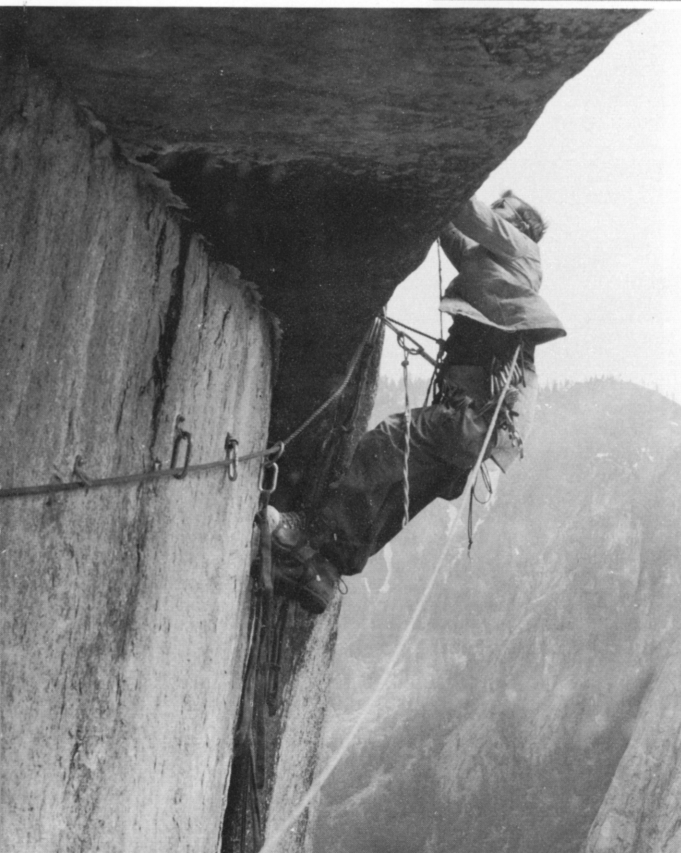


PLATE 22

On overhanging wall at 700 feet. Baldwin wears bivouac seat sling. First HANGING BIVOUAC was made here.

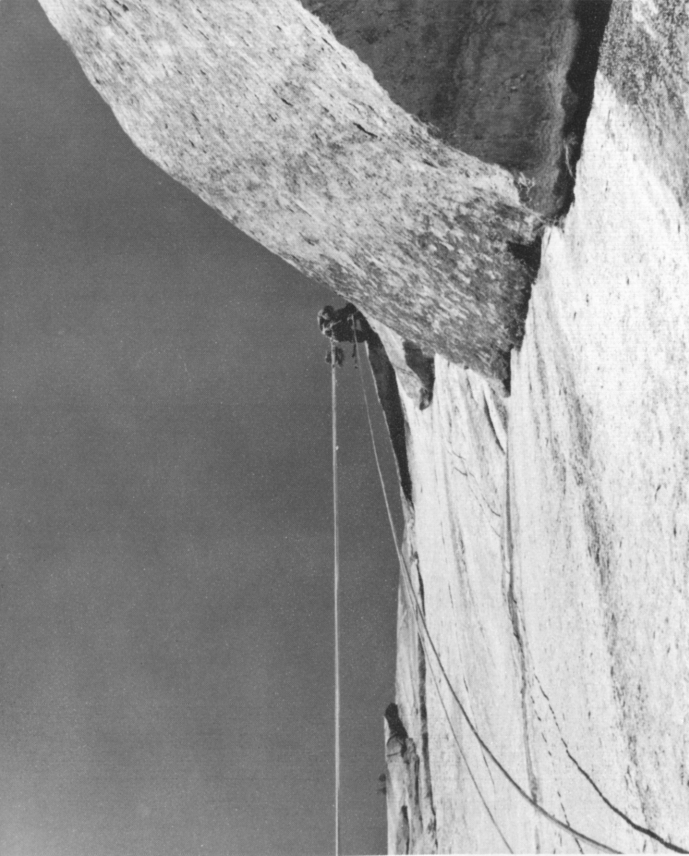


PLATE 23

The 17th pitch of SOUTH-WEST WALL of EL CAPITAN at 1600 feet. Face overhangs here for 400 feet. Nailing under overhang of class 6.7.

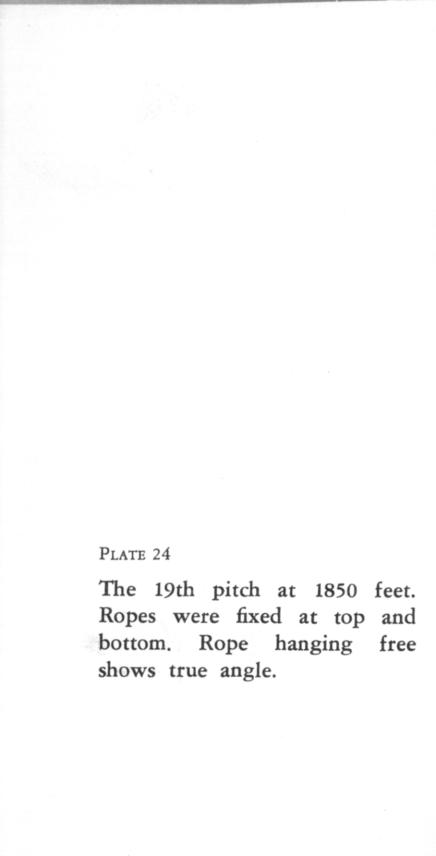


PLATE 24

The 19th pitch at 1850 feet. Ropes were fixed at top and bottom. Rope hanging free shows true angle.

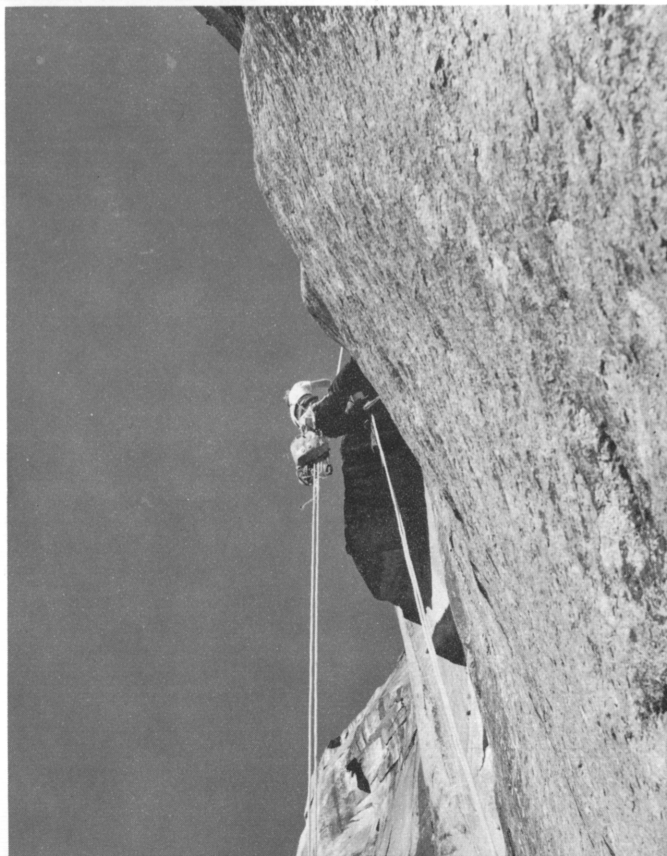


PLATE 25

Crack of 6.8 difficulty directly
above *The Ledge*.

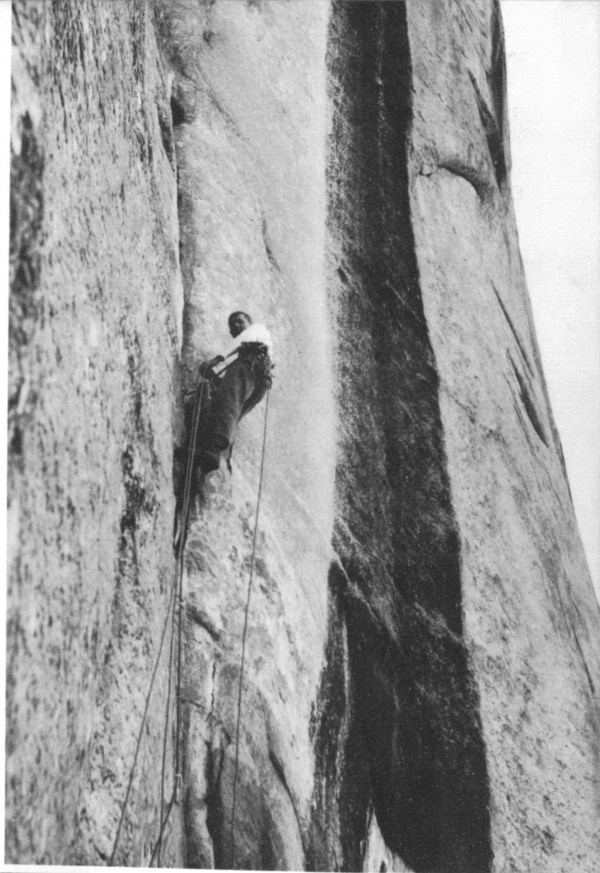


PLATE 26

Prusiking above Thanksgiving
Ledge on SOUTHWEST FACE
of EL CAPITAN.



PLATE 27

BIVOUAC on *The Ledge* at 1150 feet.

EQUIPMENT used on ascent of SOUTHWEST FACE of EL CAPITAN.

PLATE 28

