

The Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses

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THE GREAT north faces of the Alps have exerted a peculiar fascination for climbers since the time when climbing techniques became sufficiently advanced for ascents of these routes to be considered seriously. Their combinations of length (and grandeur), technical difficulties and generally poor weather represented to many people the ultimate challenges of Alpine climbing, requiring stamina, a broad variety of techniques and, in some cases, considerable luck to be climbed successfully. Of the six north faces described by Gaston Rébuffat (in his book *Starlight and Storm*) the Eigerwand is perhaps the most famous. The history of efforts on that face, some successful, so many ending in bitter tragedy, have been the subject of a book (*The White Spider* by Heinrich Harrer). The face is characterized by great hazard, greater than that found on any of the others. Of the other five north faces, two, the Piz Badile in the Engadine, and the Cima Grande di Lavaredo in the Dolomites, are pure rock climbs. The last three are mixed climbs having both rock and snow and ice in proportions that depend on the season. These climbs are the north faces of the Dru, the Matterhorn and the Grandes Jorasses. Of these the greatest in size, and perhaps the most magnificent, is the face of the Grandes Jorasses. Of all six it is the most difficult technically and, consequently, the only one that has not yet been climbed in the winter.† It has been climbed a number of times in the summer however and there are a number of accounts of such ascents.* A further account of an ascent would not be warranted were it not for the fact that growing interest in Alpine climbing among American climbers makes it useful to publish a complete description of such a big climb in a journal accessible to those tempted to try an ascent. The European climbers, before starting on a major ascent, "do their homework" by assembling what in France is called a "topo". A topo is not a topographic map but is as complete a route description as

† Climbed on January 25-31, 1963 by the Italian guides Walter Bonatti and Cosimo Zapelli.
—Editor.

* For example in: *Starlight and Storm* by Gaston Rébuffat, E. P. Dutton, New York 1957; *Die Drei Letzten Probleme der Alpen* by Anderl Heckmaier, F. Bruckman, Munich 1949; *Les Conquêteurs de l'Inutile* by Lionel Terray, Editions Gallimard, Paris 1961.

[8 H]

SUMMIT

Summit "Tour Rousse"

Climb easy rocks II-III to just below summit.
Climb broken easy wall to summit.

[6 1/2 H]

"Tour Rousse"

Platform

Climb up a little wall (icy or wet) into a couloir IV +
Go up, bearing left, on easy rocks to crest of spur above.

Open diagonal chimney to right (Good bivouac at top)

"Couloir Rouge". Dangerous unstable rock.

Climb this couloir for 300 ft. (V with pitches V*) to foot of unbroken wall of great step which turns the top of spur ("Tour Rousse"). Traverse right, out of couloir, for 130 ft. into a slanting chimney IV, then along horizontal ledge to right.

[4 H]

2nd. F.R. Bivouac (Poor bivouac)

Climb left side of triangular snow slope and move right into unpleasant couloir

"Neve Triangular" 100 ft. high

Series of snow ledges to right of route

"Le Fil de l'Éperon"

Grade III-IV
Sound rock, steep slabs.
Climb on crest of spur last two pitches.

Secure Bivouac

Top of Tour Grise

Steep Wall V + Climbs directly above Cassin Bivouac, bearing left on very steep rocks with reasonably adequate holds. In 150 ft. one should reach top of Tour Gris on crest of spur.

[10 H]

2nd Cassin Bivouac (Poor)

Ledge II

Overhang V, bad rock

Quartzite ledge system. Appears to lead to great couloir to right of spur. Good Bivouac area.

Bottom of Tour Grise

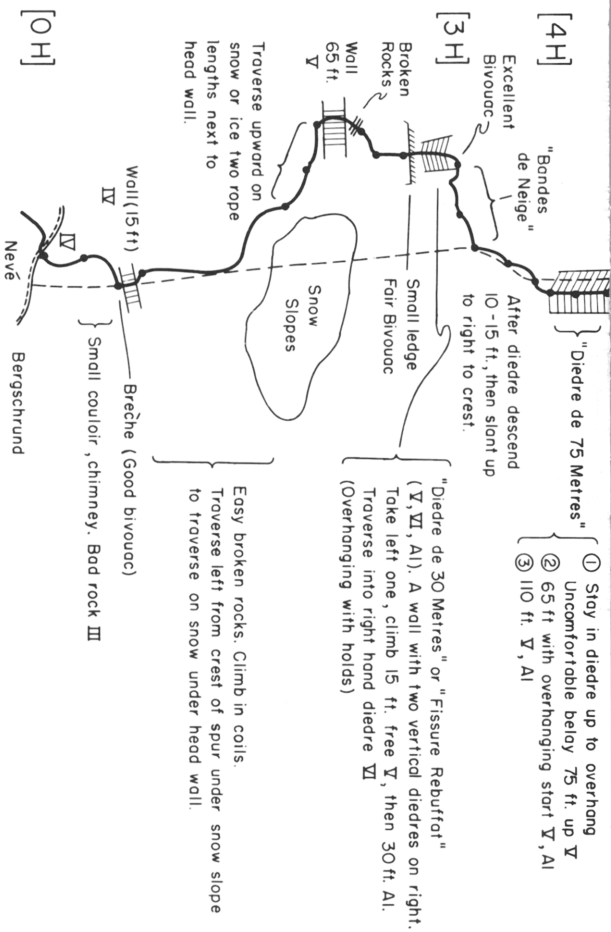
V + Traverse

F.R. Bivouac (Poor)

Exit from long

Chimney after 30 ft.

Black icy overhang



THE WALKER SPUR ON THE GRANDES JORASSES

The Crest of the Spur is shown as a dotted line. "Le Fil de l'Éperon"

Belay Points : Round Dots • (Using 150 ft. rope). Approximate only.
Climbing Time : [in square brackets], based on "average" 18 hr. ascent.

"Diedre" : Open book
"Brèche" : Notch

"Bondes de Neige" : Horizontal snow bands.

Groding System (approximate correspondence)

VI, VII : 5.9, 5.8

V⁺, V, V⁻ : 5.7-5.6

IV⁺, IV, IV⁻ : 5.5-5.3

III : 5.2-5.0 and some 4

AI : Artificial (Direct Aid), 6.2

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can be gathered by talking to other climbers who are familiar with the route. A topo is not a supplement to the usually inadequate guidebook description of a major climb—it supplants it entirely. *The White Spider* contains sufficient information to allow one to construct a topo for the Eigerwand. Gary Hemming had done his homework for the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses and done it well before I met him in Chamonix in the middle of August, 1962. We made two attempts on the principal route on the Grandes Jorasses north face, the Walker Spur, the second being successful. Afterwards we constructed a new topo for the route, based in part on Gary's earlier and by then quite battered topo. The present article is intended to serve as introduction and commentary for this topo for those climbers who may not have either the time, the language skills, or the wide acquaintance necessary to construct one for themselves.

The Grandes Jorasses has a long summit ridge forming a part of the French-Italian border. The ridge marks the top of the great wall of the north face of the Grandes Jorasses, along whose foot the Mont Mallet glacier runs for over a mile before forming the principal source of the Leschaux glacier. Two particularly striking pillars or spurs reach from the Mont Mallet glacier to two of the half dozen points or summits that lie on the summit ridge, the Michel Croz Spur ending at the Pointe Michel-Croz (13,280 feet), and the Walker Spur which reaches the true summit of the Grandes Jorasses at the Pointe Walker (13,790 feet). Both spurs reach the summit ridge in single unbroken rises.

As early as 1928 there were attempts to force a way up the face. These took place primarily on the Croz or central spur, as it is shorter and somewhat less difficult than the Walker Spur, and is one of the limited number of routes that avoids to a considerable extent the great hazard from rock-fall that exists in the couloirs that cut the face. Climbing techniques were still not sufficiently advanced, however, and little progress was made. In 1931 two different German parties attempted the couloir between the spurs; two climbers were killed. In 1932 nearly half a dozen parties, among them Toni Schmid who had first climbed the north face of the Matterhorn, were turned back by the lower smooth slabs of the Walker Spur. In 1933 and in 1934 parties succeeded in pushing further up the Walker Spur. The 1934 attempts were made simultaneously in late July by four parties, three of whom descended in the face of bad weather when about 2000 feet from the summit. One German rope attempted to continue the climb but was forced to retreat from a point higher on the face after a bivouac. One of the climbers fell and was killed in the descent, the other taking two more days in completing the descent alone.

In June of 1935 after a spell of warm weather which put the north face routes in good condition, the Germans Peters and Meier succeeded in their attempt on the Croz Spur.

In August of 1938 the Italians, Cassin, Tizzoni, and Esposito completed the ascent of the Walker Spur. They required three days and their route, with one minor alteration, has remained the only one opened on this spur.

The route was not climbed again until after the war, in the summer of 1945, when the French guides G. Rébuffat and E. Frendo achieved it; again three days were required, with two bivouacs on the face. On this ascent Rébuffat climbed directly up from the headwall above the first ice traverse, a variation to the left of the first ascent route and somewhat to the left of the crest of the spur. This difficult variant, called the "Fissure Rébuffat" or the "Dièdre de 30 mètres", is now included as part of the standard route. The following year the guides L. Terray and L. Lachenal made an ascent during which, in bad weather, they became lost and traversed too far to the right of the crest line. They were forced into the couloir high up on the face, the same couloir that had years before claimed the German party. The line they forced on the upper third of the face, in the couloir, on loose, unstable rock was difficult in the extreme and very dangerous. It is called the Terray "Escape" and it was a very narrow one.

By the summer of 1962 about twenty parties had climbed the Grandes Jorasses by the Walker Spur. All attempts to climb it in the winter had been turned back by the combination of winter conditions and the normal difficulties of the route although by that time all the other north faces had been the scenes of winter ascents, in some cases more than one. One of the attempts on the Walker Spur, in the late winter of 1962, had been made by friends of mine, John Harlin and Gary Hemming, who with Hobey DeStaebler and me had made a trip in to the Battle Range in British Columbia in 1957.

By the time I encountered Gary in middle August, he had already had the opportunity to complete a number of climbs in the Chamonix area, among them a fine new route on the west face of the Dru. Gary has a good command of French and when I met him was finishing up at the aspirant-guide school in Chamonix.

Our first attempt on the Walker Spur was intended to follow the standard two-day schedule. We left the Leschaux Refuge about 1:30 A.M. shortly followed by a Swiss party of three and a French party of two. A spell of fine weather had brought, as it turned out, over a dozen people to try the ascent of the Walker. We were carrying bivouac equipment and had pared down the weight of our equipment so either of us could lead

without having to swap packs or to haul them. We roped up just before a clear windless dawn and started climbing as soon as there was enough light to see by. By 7:30 we were high enough so we could see massed black clouds on the horizon toward Geneva, although it was clear and sunny in the mountains. We had, by this time, seen other climbers ahead of us on the route who had apparently bivouacked not many pitches from the bottom. The weather soon deteriorated with a speed that is characteristic of the Alps. Within a few hours the route above us was entirely hidden by a chill mist, the blue sky was gone and a cold biting wind had started. Everyone turned back except one English party who were high on the face. The retreat required nearly seven hours and was accompanied by considerable rockfall. Aside from the obvious utility of hard hats (everyone wears them except the French), we had learned also a lot about the route up to the "Dièdre de 75 metres", our project to lead with packs on, and the lesson so unfamiliar to American climbers: the necessity for great speed.

During the next attempt three days later, we had the route essentially to ourselves for we had been able to work out a timetable that avoided other climbers but which cut the climb into two satisfactory segments. We left a base camp not far from Montenvers at eight A.M. after a good night's sleep. We roped up at one P.M. carrying packs which had been lightened even more than for the earlier attempt. In six hours, just as the sun set, we reached the Frendo-Rébuffat bivouac site, a little less than half way up the climb but with considerably less than half of the difficult climbing complete. We had both decided to bring crampons and axes for the two upward ice-traverse pitches below the crux pitch of the first day, the Fissure Rébuffat, for the traverse of the "Bandes de Neige" after this crux pitch and for the descent into Italy. It was a wise decision.

The bivouac area is narrow and uncomfortable, and our topo failed to show the good sites three or four pitches further up. Although the temperature was well below freezing we had fine weather with clear skies and little wind. We were slow starting the following morning because of the cold—in August the morning sun doesn't shine on that part of the route. The weather held fine during the day and we reached the summit about twenty minutes before sunset having climbed for over an hour in the late afternoon sun. Of the second day's climbing the most difficult sections were found on the "Tour Grise", the most dangerous ones on the "Tour Rousse". The chimney on the "Tour Rousse" apparently cannot be avoided but it is rotten unstable rock and difficult to protect adequately. Once the exit from this chimney has been reached not only are good bivouac sites immediately at hand but there are no further difficulties ahead.

We descended the Italian side of the Grandes Jorasses using our headlamps and reached the *refuge* just after midnight. The descent is complicated and cannot be found easily without either prior knowledge or a guidebook description. It does not require a rope except during travel on the glacier.

The fine weather that held before and during our ascent had insured that the route was in excellent condition and as a result the climb had proceeded easily and without incident. The rappel about half-way up the route leaves a party at a place from which retreat would be difficult. A sudden bad storm catching a party en route on the upper half of the climb could easily create a serious situation from which escape would be very taxing. Such a possibility constitutes an important potential hazard and one that has to be considered in selection of food and equipment. (Terryay gives an interesting account of his escape under such circumstances.) The consequence of this and other Alpine circumstances mean that it is hard to grade the difficulty of the various pitches in a meaningful way. A sudden freezing rain can change a grade 4 friction pitch into one that is impossible to ascend and hazardous to descend. In the topo we have, for the sake of consistency, made the assignments assuming the route to be in good condition and snow or ice, where indicated, is probably permanent and less extensive than might be met in other circumstances. The assignments of the difficulties should clearly be regarded as lower limits. Because of these uncertainties we felt it was not worthwhile to use the Yosemite decimal system but we have shown the correspondence between it and the French roman-numeral system. Climbing time as shown is based on an ascent with good conditions.

There is no question that the Walker Spur is on one of the most magnificent of the Alpine north faces and that an ascent lives up to expectations. We both enjoyed the climb enormously.

