

The North Face Direct of Sondre Trolltind

JOHN AMATT, *Alpine Climbing Group*

AFTER our ascent of the Trolltind Wall in 1965,* it seemed to me that Norway must be the site of future developments in technical climbing. Nowhere else outside America could boast such vertical granite walls and even the famous Yosemite climbs must take second place in terms of height. The direct route on Trollveggen, which was climbed for the first time by a French party this year, is close on 5000 vertical or overhanging feet, which compares very favourably with the 3000-foot bastion of El Capitan. On these walls of the Romsdal, one can find granite climbing comparable in difficulty with anything in the world.

After Trollveggen itself, the most impressive face in the valley is the upper north face of Sondre Trolltind, which falls sheer and smooth for nearly 2000 feet. In this respect, it is even more impressive than the Trollwall, for in all of these 2000 feet, there is not a ledge large enough to hold snow after a storm. Couple with this, a long approach of 2500 feet Grade IV slabs, and an upper 1000 feet of broken rock, and the proposed North Face Direct route takes on quite serious proportions.

When Rusty Baillie and I arrived in the valley at the beginning of August, the French were well on the way to completing their climb. In many ways, it was a pity that they had to use fixed ropes on most of the wall, but there can be no doubt that some of the climbing they had experienced must have been extreme. However, their accomplishment brought to our notice the need for one thing. During the twenty-one days taken over the ascent, they had climbed throughout some very bad weather and this confirmed what Baillie and I had thought: that to complete a route of major proportions in Norway, one had to be prepared to climb in any weather.

* The Trolltind Wall or Trollveggen was first climbed nearly simultaneously by two groups by completely different routes. The more easterly route was climbed by AAC member Leif-Norman Patterson with the Norwegians Odd Eliassen, Ole Enersen and Jon Teigland. (See *A.A.C.*, 1966, 15:1, pp. 214-5.) The British party of John Amatt, Anthony Howard and William Tweedale made their climb from July 19 to 24, 1965. (See *Alpine Journal*, vol. LXXI, May 1966, pp. 98-102). A third route was made from July 21 to August 10, 1967 by the Frenchmen Claude Deck, Yves Boussard, Jérôme Brunet, Patrick Cordier and Jean Fréhel. The French route ascended between the two earlier ones.

With this in mind, we proposed to wear fully waterproof clothing in spite of heavy condensation. We also proposed to use the modern Yosemite techniques of climbing. These completely reject the use of fixed ropes of any kind and rely for success on the ability of the climbers to move quickly and safely. On a wall of this difficulty and size, there is no room for a "passenger." Each climber has to have the utmost faith and confidence in his companion's ability, for at many times a life may be in the balance.

The weather in August was far from good, and during a two-day "quick-look" we gained only 300 feet of height on the difficult middle section. Leaving the valley at three o'clock, just as the crimson dawn was breaking, we spent long hours in fruitless route-finding on the smooth wet slabs which form the approach to the upper wall. Climbing unroped, carrying the 40-pound hauling sacks, we felt uncertain on the holdless slabs, and it was not until we evolved our "new" technique that we made any fast progress at all. At about 1000 feet, the slabs reared up into a steep vegetated buttress, and although the climbing was never more than Grade IV when dry, the wet rock and the exposure were sufficient to warrant great care.

Leaving his heavy sack with me, Rusty led out 150 feet of double rope and anchored it, before abseiling (rappelling) down to where I had belayed. As he abseiled down one rope, I climbed the other, using a *Jiimar* clamp for safety, and carrying the hauling sack. On completing the abseil, Baillie then climbed back up the second rope, also carrying his sack. The net result was one of speed and safety and the first person to reach the anchor point for the ropes had sufficient time to prepare to lead the next pitch before the second man arrived.

In this way, we quickly disposed of another 1000 feet of Grade IV slabs and some 500 feet of snow, to arrive at the foot of the steep upper wall. Here we became lost in the swirling mist, which had been gradually creeping up, and we traversed left in bad visibility, finding great difficulty in orientating ourselves in relation to the wall above. By seven o'clock, I had climbed a Grade V chimney leading to the top of a pedestal below the wall, and abseiled off leaving the ropes hanging for the morrow.

In our radio contact with the valley that night, we were disturbed to hear that more bad weather was forecast, but we soon settled down to a good night's rest. We were no longer worried! We had rubbed shoulders with the problem and were eager to match our resources against its defences. However, during the infrequent clearings of the mist during the night, it was un-nerving to gaze upwards at the maze of overhangs

that guarded the base of the wall. This was the problem! Once above the overhangs, we could envisage fast progress, but even our most pessimistic forecasts could not prepare us for the extreme difficulties we were to find there.

The next day dawned clear, and we awoke as the sun brushed the wall at four o'clock during its morning promenade behind the nearby Romsdalshorn. All the equipment had to be sorted, the pegs carefully racked on gear slings, bivouac gear and clothing packed in one hauling sack, and food for six days and twelve pints of water carefully placed in the other. Consequently, it was not before five o'clock that I began to prusik up the rope left the previous night.

For climbing and prusiking we were using a single 11-mm. perlon rope, which would be the only rope we would actually use whilst climbing. We had abandoned the traditional double rope technique and were relying on tape tie-off loops and slings to extend the pegs and alleviate rope drag. It is interesting to note that during the entire duration of the climb, we had no trouble whatsoever with the ropes dragging through the karabiners. The only other rope we were carrying was a 9-mm. perlon which was used for sack-hauling. Here, we were using another technique from Yosemite. With 150 feet of rope, *Jiimar* clamps, and a small pulley, the entire leg strength and weight of the climber could be brought to bear. Using this method, we had no trouble in hauling both sacks together—a load of over 80 pounds in one lift.

At the end of the 150-foot run-out, I hauled the sacks and Rusty followed simultaneously, prusiking up the tied-off climbing rope. Thus, there was no belay in the traditional sense, but the climber was able to belay himself with the two *Jiimar* clamps. At any instant, one of the clamps would be under tension, and therefore jammed on the rope. This clamp would be the belay! The method of climbing is safe in that the rope is always tied to the leader's belay (thus ensuring that the belay is a good one) and that the only danger lies in a stone falling on the rope at the moment the second man is climbing. And on a face of this verticality, there is never much, if any, dangerous stonefall.

Saving Rusty for the more difficult work ahead, I offered to lead the next pitch and soon became involved in loose rock and moss in what had appeared to be an easy chimney. Indeed, it was not until I had led out 120 feet of rope and placed ten pegs in the overhanging rock, that I emerged on a sloping ledge at the foot of the preliminary overhangs.

Here, the climbing became hard! The next 200 feet occupied most of the day and most of our mental and physical resources into the bargain.

Neither of us placed a peg that did not have to be tied-off short. The cracks were blind, shallow, too thin, or just plain awkward. The pegs went in grudgingly and had to be selected with great care; at one place Baillie had to couple a Knife-blade with a Rurp—the revolutionary Realised Ultimate Reality Piton, with a blade length of one centimetre—which symbolises very nearly the ultimate in peg climbing.

At the end of the second rope-length, I fixed a belay and swung in my nylon seat as Rusty prusiked up the rope, removing the pegs as he progressed. None needed more than two hits with the hammer to loosen them; few pegs in that pitch had been really safe! As he neared the belay, and the number of pegs between us decreased, I once more became aware of the feeling of insecurity which grows with alarming haste in such a position, until we were both hanging from the three or four belay pegs driven into a crack in the blank wall. I was glad when Rusty had climbed past, jerking the seemingly so insecure anchorage in the process, and moved up into the viciously overhanging chimney that blocked our progress.

The climbing was extreme—the first pitch of A4—and made the two earlier A3 pitches seem like child's play. Too wide to jam in any way, the pitch finally succumbed to Baillie's engineering skill with a combination of Skyhook moves and large Bong-bong placings deep in the slimy innards of the crack. After three hours' work, he had gained thirty feet, used up most of the skin off the knuckles of both hands, and had reached a point where it was possible to lasso a flake and pull over a small roof.

Our wet clothes stuck clammy to our cold skin. The water dripping off the overhangs above had taken its toll of our resources, and the blood circulation to my legs had long since been cut off by the hours of sitting in the cramped confines of the nylon belay seat. But we had reached a ledge! On depegging the pitch, I had pulled myself up on the anchor pegs to find Baillie fast asleep on our "Palace"—the jagged top of a flake, some four feet long by two feet wide. But it was a ledge, the first for 300 feet, and soon we were preparing for our second bivouac.

But I, for one, did not rest that night. I found the ledge desperately uncomfortable. The best I could achieve was to jam myself down the back of the knife edge, but the icy cold of the wet rock prohibited little more than a prolonged doze. During the night, it rained; the water dripped in constant percussion off the overhangs above and trickled through the gaps in our bivouac bags.

It is always on the first or second day of a climb when the temptation to retreat is greatest. Once conquered, you realize it is easier to climb

upwards, you become as one with your vertical environment, and you marvel at the difficulties you had previously feared. Next morning, however, the weather showed obvious signs of deterioration and glad of the excuse to retreat, we began the first of the long abseils to the valley below.

For the next week, we rarely saw the mountain tops as the rain swept through the valley in vicious torrents. No one climbed. But as always, the weather cleared and the evening of August 23 found us once more at our high point. Throughout the day, we had retraced our steps, having to place all the pegs that we had previously removed in our wish to leave the climb clean. From the top of the flake, we fixed the first of the 150-foot ropes and abseiled down, leaving the second rope hanging from the belay below. A good night's sleep on the bigger ledges at the foot of the wall was worth any amount of extra effort involved the next day.

The following morning, we were awake at three o'clock and two hours later had prusiked up the 300 feet of hanging rope with our loads. Leading off from the flake, I traversed left on very small holds before placing a large Angle peg in a pocket in the rock. Hammering the peg only fractured the rock around, but by dint of careful weight distribution, it held as I stood up and placed a Rurp behind an expanding flake. As I reached down to unclip the *étrier*, the bottom peg pulled out of the pocket and tinkled down the rope towards Baillie, who was watching with a look of impending doom on his face. A fall here would have resulted in a wild swing across the face, a fact of which I was well aware. But there seemed no place to put a peg. All the cracks were blind, and I had left the bolt bag behind. But we still had Skyhooks, those little steel hooks which were to save us time and time again on the climb. So a Skyhook move it had to be, placed carefully on a little rugosity in the rock and then even more carefully stood on. A Knife-blade and two tied-off Lost Arrows led to an ideal placing for a Crack-Tack which, although it only entered the rock for three-quarters of an inch, proved to be the best peg on the pitch. Above, a small overhang fell to more Skyhook moves and took me to sustained Grade VI free-climbing and A3 pegging up a square-cut groove leading to the huge roof. Here I took up a hanging stance below the 25-foot overhang and relaxed back in my hammock. Though certainly the hardest aid lead of my experience, it was just another pitch on this wall!

As Rusty began to prusik up the anchored rope, we became lost in swirling mist and I was left to catch drips from the roof to augment our limited water supply. Before long, the constant drainage had soaked through even my heavily proofed yachting anorak and I began to shiver

in the cold. Below me, the sound of hammer on peg gradually came closer and soon the Helly-Hansen clad figure of Baillie appeared at the foot of the groove. Slowly he climbed the rope, pushing the clamps up, before sitting back as he unclipped the karabiners and proceeded to remove each peg in turn.

Above, the way was blocked by an immense roof, an inverted staircase of overhangs stretching out horizontally for 25 feet. But the cracks were good! Now it was just a matter of selecting the right peg and placing it with care. Baillie "knocked-off" the roof in thirty minutes of A2 pegging.

Now we could really get cracking! Coming after the last two A4 pitches, it came as a great tonic and we were both full of confidence and jubilation as we climbed on through the mists. At 6:30 P.M. I climbed a three-foot overhang and found myself below a small ledge, the first since we had left the top of the flake that morning. For well over twelve hours, our world had been limited to a few square feet of rock, our only foothold being pegs driven into the rock, and in my haste to reach the ledge, I almost fell off as I pushed the free-climbing to the limit. Such a stupid mistake would have meant a bad fall of thirty feet.

Our radio contact that night brought us once more into the bosom of our friends in the valley. Climbing in mist, unable to see even the tiny beetle-like cars crawling along the main Andalsnes-Oslo road, we had felt very lonely. It was marvellous to be able to talk to Rusty's wife, Pat, and to our Norwegian friends in the valley and to know that someone down there was caring about us in our stark overwhelming rock world. Even the sound of Rusty's baby gurgling down the speaker filled us with great joy!

The bivouac ledge was small, but I slept well as the exhaustion of the day's climbing overcame the discomfort. Above us now lay 500 feet of difficult climbing leading to a system of ledges which cut across the face. Beyond these ledges lay another 1500 feet of climbing, but we did not envisage any problem. The hardest climbing was, in fact, below us now. We could relax in the security of our perch under the stars as we awaited the pale golden glow of dawn. The rock was dry and firm, the cracks good and the overhangs below. We were becoming accustomed to living in this vertical world and precaution was becoming reflex, but we had to be wary now of overconfidence.

The following morning, I unclipped my helmet from the karabiner where it had hung securely all night. The next second, it bounced down the face, touching the rock once below my feet and then sweeping down in one huge arc before landing on the slabs at the foot of the wall. Now

lost in mist, I could only trace its fall by the sound as it bounced down a further two thousand feet of slabs to the valley floor. I had plenty of time to reflect on the consequences of a mistake, the result of familiarity, which could be fatal.

That day, August 25, we climbed over 500 feet up a magnificent line of grooves leading in a direct line towards the summit. Surely there could be no more aesthetic line in the whole of the Romsdal. Never were we in trouble with route-finding. Pitch followed pitch in logical sequence, groove followed groove, crack followed crack as we overcame the last small overhangs leading to the ledges at 1500 feet. But still the difficulties did not relent.

At 6:15 P.M. that night, Rusty reached the ledges, where we were surprised to find a huge detached flake. It was encouraging to find a pitch where we could climb free, as behind the flake a chimney led to more grooves and corners and up to the final barrier of overhangs. Behind the flake we found an ideal bivouac spot, safe, sheltered and warm, and perfect for rigging the hammocks.

The 26th dawned clear, with hardly a cloud to blemish the clear blue sky. Mile upon mile of snow-capped peaks and rock faces, blended together in an unforgettable mosaic of colour.

We were awake early as we realized that we had a chance of completing the climb that day! After so much hardship, we had no desire to prolong the agony. Eating all our spare food, and leaving a cache of non-perishables for some future party, we prusiked up the ropes to the top of the flake, hauling the now much lighter sacks behind us. At 4:30 A.M., just as the sun emerged from behind the stark outline of the Romsdalshorn, Rusty began work on the first artificial pitch. Leading out 130 feet of rope, and belaying in his nylon seat, he hauled the sacks as I followed up the rope. Depegging was easy, but all the pegs had been firm.

Nowhere before had either of us found climbing such as this. It was certainly the hardest climb that either of us had ever done, but also the most sensational and enjoyable.

Above lay a fiercely overhanging chimney, arching out for ten feet into the sky above our heads. Below lay a sheer drop of 2000 feet and a feeling of exposure that was strengthened by a further drop of slabs below the foot of the wall. Placing two pegs, I reached out and swung up on huge jugs, the rope hanging out from the rock above Baillie's head. The further I climbed, the further the rope hung out, the more obvious the drop. But this was climbing! After 2000 feet of peg climbing and placing over 600 pitons, it was a thrill to be able to climb free, and to feel the solid rock flow beneath your hands and feet. I could not find the

courage or the need to stop and place a peg.

Above lay another overhanging chimney, climbed with ease by Baillie, and at last we found easy ground. By eleven o'clock, we were sitting on scree ledges and debating how to tackle the remaining 600 feet to the top.

But first we had to reorganize our loads and await a radio contact at midday. Eating all our remaining food and throwing away a bag of spare peanuts and raisins, our staple diet for the climb, we set off in high spirits for a rendezvous with a bottle of cognac on the summit. Leap-frogging in 150-foot stretches, we rapidly disposed of the comparatively easy but desperately loose and dangerous rock; after two hours we were still far short of the top.

And then followed near disaster. . . . While removing a belay peg, my hammering loosened a huge flake which detached itself from the rock above and crashed on my un-protected head. The whole weight of the five-foot-square block had caught me on the head, glanced off my shoulder and disappeared reverberating down the face. Above, Baillie instinctively tightened his grip on the rope, but I was still hanging from my other peg, my head swirling, and with a searing pain in my left shoulder.

From now on, I could not lead and the weight of responsibility fell on Baillie's shoulders. For me the simplest climbing became hard, the firmest rock became loose. Then confidence returned and I was soon able to climb safely again.

On the top, we were greeted by two Norwegian friends who had come up specially to bring us the promised cognac. Photography followed. Pressmen were waiting to be satisfied, there was Norwegian television to perform for, but most of all there was our own ego to boost.

But what remained of the climb? A line on a photograph? A lot of words on a piece of paper? No! There was more. In the first place, there was an experience lasting seven days; there was 5000 feet of extreme climbing taking a total of fifty-five hours; but there was also a deeper understanding of ourselves, of our own weaknesses and limitations. And we had established a comradeship which could only be experienced when one had climbed on the knife-edge of fear together. And our friendship had been strengthened by the mutual feeling and intimate understanding that is experienced through the conquest of fear. But, after all, is this not what climbing is all about? Or is it just a part. . . .

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Romsdal, Norway.

NEW ROUTE: Sondre Trolltind, North Face Direct. Final push from August 23 to 26, 1967 by John Amatt and Robert (Rusty) Baillie.