

Half Dome in Winter

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PERHAPS it was the wine of the cool autumn breeze. Or perhaps as climbers sometimes meet, we met. Rob Kiesel was an aggressive downhill racer. Perhaps it was his single-minded drive, which induced success. Nevertheless, he was somewhat new to climbing and this would be no leisurely climb. On the other hand, I was experienced with winter methods but had found little time for training. Since Rob had never been on Half Dome, I felt a little bit guilty as I explained how straight-forward the route would be in winter.

"Well, Greg, it sounds good, but if it gets tricky, then you can lead." It would be Rob's first grade six, but then again, grades are of no consequence anymore.

We began planning for the climb in early December. We hoped to do the climb in four days but knew it could take more if we encountered bad weather or tough conditions. With little persuasion, we agreed to try the northwest-face route because of its alpine nature. We also agreed to try it in January—regardless of weather and short days.

The winter days blew swiftly by. On January 4 we began a frustrating journey from the storm-ridden mountains of Idaho and Utah to the milder humid Sierras. Suffering numerous mechanical difficulties we ended up stranded in Nevada. It would take a couple of days to deliver the parts from Salt Lake City. While Rob rattled slot machines, I watched with grim frustration as two clear days passed.

"Hey Greg, don't get so hyper. Remember we're going to climb it regardless of weather."

I felt a slight twinge of guilt, knowing I had perhaps duped someone into believing my insidious statements. Nevertheless, I said nothing about the approaching slopes leading to the face and their avalanche capabilities. I also said nothing about the difficulty of even finding the face in a storm. Rob was unconcerned; perhaps I should have been. After all it was still clear.

We arrived in Yosemite late at night. I was incredulous at the mild temperatures. Rob was asleep. We camped below Glacier Point. I listened wide-eyed as tremendous ice falls occurred throughout the night. Rob was asleep.

We left for the face. We had the welcome load-carrying help of Dick Weithorn, Lance Wilcox, and Scott Etherington. Dick planned on photographing the climb, Lance and Scott planned on a week of alpine

touring training. By late afternoon we camped by a large drift. It was windblown and hard, we were only windblown.

The next day we continued up and over the east shoulder of Half Dome. The weather was clear and by four o'clock that afternoon we had crossed the dangerous, fractured north slopes below Half Dome. I led the first pitch of the route that afternoon. While Rob lodged below, I thrashed slowly up the well lubricated ice-filled cracks. I rappelled in the dark. The rope was wet and slick. I descended somewhat rapidly into a noisy heap on top of Rob in the bergschrund at the base. That night it began.

"Hey, what's that noise!"

"A jet, I think."

"No, that isn't like any jet I've heard." The reply was drowned out by the terrific thunder of crashing ice around us. We five jammed against the inside wall of our platform, thankful for the overhang.

"Hey, wake me up when it's over." It wasn't. We listened in adrenalin-rushed awe as the next volley jetted toward us.

"Now I'm sure that's a jet." Someone said with pseudo-optimism. No one had time to reply. Again, only a few small blocks struck the tent.

"Hey, have you guys ever played dodge ball?"

By morning we were a sorry lot—sorry, but alive. We slowly unfolded from our contorted positions. "Did you guys sleep well?" I asked while shaking my arm violently.

"Nope."

"Well, at least my arm did."

By 8:30 A.M. Rob was leading the second pitch. Lance and Scott traversed to the east shoulder. Only Dick remained below. The first two pitches had gone well. The third didn't. It was very icy, and I hadn't brought crampons. (After all, they weigh too much, are hard to haul, and this was a rock climb in winter; besides, it didn't look very icy.)

The fourth pitch was typical rock climbing—a bit colder, but just wall climbing. It was afternoon. A crescendo of smaller ice blocks began to trickle down the face. We prepared for the next pitch in ominous silence. The climbing would be lower angle with fewer places to hide. "Well, let's go." My voice was partially drowned out by a loud "whump" from above. We turned upward to see almost the entire length of the summit cornice break off. A shadowy curtain descended toward the puppet act that had crossed its strings on the ledge below. We thought of running but our ledge was small and downsloping. In the end we could do little but wait. With our blue helmets pulled down tightly we prepared to steer our spaceship through the impossible meteor field. The final meteor rattled past. "Hey Greg, that was really close." "Yeh, we better get moving."

Time had kept pace with us. It was late afternoon. We prepared to bivouac in our exposed position. We knew that mountains do not search out men—but the feeling? Hunted. It would be a cold night—maybe even a sleepless one, but our spirits were high. The weather was good, the climb was still progressing, and a lasting friendship was being formed. We hung our larp tent and climbed in. We soon forgot our exposed location and slept well from fatigue. Down below, avalanches rumbled noisily down the windslab slopes. Still further below the Merced flowed quietly downward to its base level of existence—miles away, the warm sun and the ocean.

We were climbing again by eight A.M. The pitches became an endless rhyme metered by the dissonant staccato of falling ice blocks. We soon learned the key to Half Dome's defense lay in its rhythm. We geared our minds to a measured verse of Climb and Hide, Climb and Hide. We subconsciously divided the pitches to match our verse. We were conforming.

By mid-afternoon we approached a large ramp-like ledge. The three-foot burden of snow was extremely unstable with a steeply down-sloping slushy base. I climbed the hollow ice at its lower end with great care. Rob was belaying me from an exposed position. I called down and asked him if he was getting hit by the ice chunks I knocked off. His only reply was "Just go for it, man." I thrashed unscrupulously up the ledge. Fortunately the snow held.

Our third day consisted of a long traverse on very narrow icy ledges—followed by more wall climbing. We tried to climb rapidly but the ledges were too insecure. Soon we had traversed onto the main vertical face. We felt relieved to be out from under the main snow and ice burden, though the ice-filled chimneys above didn't look promising. It was late afternoon. The mountain quieted down. The temperature was dropping. We joked about our exposed position. It felt good to laugh at ourselves—how difficult it is for most. We watched in detached wonder as car lights wove distant patterns on the valley floor. We no longer felt foreign in our two-dimensional environment and watched the resplendent stars with primeval awe. It felt good to be alive—good but cold.

The fourth day's climbing brought us high into the cold ice chimneys. Gentle snow storms scurried over causing little change to our pin-wedged perch. I thought about how the wall rats must feel scurrying away much of their lives in the gloomy chambers formed behind the giant flake systems. It would feel good to be back on the face.

Time had become but a shadow bending further. We climbed out of the chimneys early on the fifth day then climbed across narrow ice-covered ledges, using the outermost exposed inches with great care. Protection was non-existent. We were relieved to reach big sandy ledges. We discussed our situation between brews of ice tea and hoped to get

to the top the following day. The night went slowly inside our tent. The hours dragged on. Strange that they should recede at night and overtake during the day.

The morning winds blew a melancholy song of approaching storm. We nailed slowly up the zigzags. Our heavy winter boots were a real problem. We cursed our snail-like pace. The top was so near, but time flowed like water through cupped hands. It was evening. With stiff pitted hands we erected the larp tent. The clouds in the distance looked ominous. Far below, the valley looked warm and friendly. Up here, the only warmth was the psychological warmth of a companion's voice. We could feel the pressure of a building storm. Clouds began scudding past the surrounding peaks. A climax seemed near.

We ate our last meal silently. The top was so close, but we were out of food.

It began to snow. The surrounding peaks were no longer visible. A great cloud had engulfed Half Dome, carrying turbulent bursts of snow across the face. We remained silent in the face of the building storm. Our tent walls flapped the foreboding warning of building wind. Sleep would not come easily. The great sequoias shook and twisted in the distance as the storm proceeded onward, ever worsening. The frantic rhythm of the ceaseless pattering of snow intermingled with cold, shrill gusts of wind. The entire tent began to groan under the storm's force. By midnight we were being lifted violently on panels of wind. Snow was driving through the tent zipper and piling up inside.

We began to feel fear.

The storm continued violently. One end of the tent was taking the brunt of the storm, while a lull formed behind the bulwark of the walls. The cold wind thickened the air until each breath was but a crystalline bite. By morning, the storm was as strong as ever.

"Well, do you think we can wait it out?"

"Not without food."

I prepared to begin the final lead. I knew it would be extremely difficult with little protection. Rob would belay from inside the tent.

The cold wind whipped the rope as I climbed out into the incredible storm. Visibility was zero in the witches' cauldron that was once the face. Rime and snow clung at fantastic angles and I wasn't sure whether the snow was blowing down or up. I began climbing. The rope soon iced up. It was obvious that this pitch would not be followed on Jümars. Two hours later, fighting against the wind, I clung desperately to a rounded clumpy nob. My eyelashes were nearly frozen together and the metal of the carabiners stuck tenaciously to my bare hands. I felt like a misplaced goldfish in a long neglected milky aquarium. I began the final section depending entirely on the adhesion of thin snow clumps to the barren rock. After six hours of climbing I pulled wearily over the final wall. Sitting in a fatigue-dazed clump I tied off our 9-mm. haul

rope directly over the visor. By late afternoon the storm began to subside rapidly. I watched Rob swim out of the murky cauldron hanging with weariness from the slipping Jümars. Tonight we would sleep warm in the company of others in a mechanized world. We would soon forget the miseries and joys of this climb. Rob and I shook hands on top huddled with the support party of Dick and Scott—an exhausted, tired group.

Old man Half Dome seemed silently unaware as we descended his icy cables. His timeless face showed no conceit—but only strength, for he had not been conquered, but only climbed.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Yosemite Valley, California.

FIRST WINTER ASCENT: Northwest Face of Half Dome, January 9 to 17, 1972 (Gregory Lowe, Robert Kiesel).

