

Torre Egger

JOHN BRAGG

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UENOS AIRES . . . the customs official, fat and red-faced, squinted at us through his spectacles; he looked down at the impressive sheaf of papers already plastered with official stamps. With a solemn nod, one more stamp, his initials, then a handshake and a smile, and we were free! Out the back door with our equipment. . . .

November 28, Río Gallegos, Hotel Gran Paris, Patagonia at last. Jane, Julie and I have flown to Gallegos with six haul bags of gear, and the van, totally overloaded, is staggering south, having left Buenos Aires two days ago.

It's cold here: low, grey clouds with scattered drops of rain, and the wind across the desert carries the smell of the mountains. Everything is in tones of grey, the landscape monotonous and barren. The wind rattles the windows of the hotel with flying gravel, and outside a stray mongrel prowls the street amidst rocks and blowing paper. Tomorrow we're hitching a ride with the Buseniche Construction Co. to their road-work camp 30 miles from the Fitz Roy area.

Images of Patagonia . . . miles of rolling desert, the dust swirling behind the van as it staggered the last 30 miles into the Park, scraping its belly on the center of the road. Patagonia . . . an *asado* at a local *estancia*, the gauchos hacking smoldering mutton from the bones of a sacrificial lamb; squirting streams of wine into their mouths from a greasy wineskin, and wiping their chins with the back of their hands. Clouds . . . sitting humpbacked over the mountains with their tails streaming out to the east; sometimes grey and soupy down to the ground hiding the wind and the water flying in all directions.

The wind . . . invisible but ubiquitous. In the immense swatches of flattened trees and the worn, squinty faces of the gauchos. Our second season in Patagonia, Jim Donini and I both have memories of the wind: one night last year in the old army barracks at the road's end when the whole building swayed and threatened to collapse; on the moraine near Lago Torre flying gravel and dust scouring our very bones. Knocked flat too many times, we finally gave up trying to get to the mountain. Finally the wind reduced our box tent to a sagging sack of broken poles and bruised bodies, then blew it away as we cut it loose in the grey morning.

Memories of Cerro Stanhardt and failure only a few hundred feet

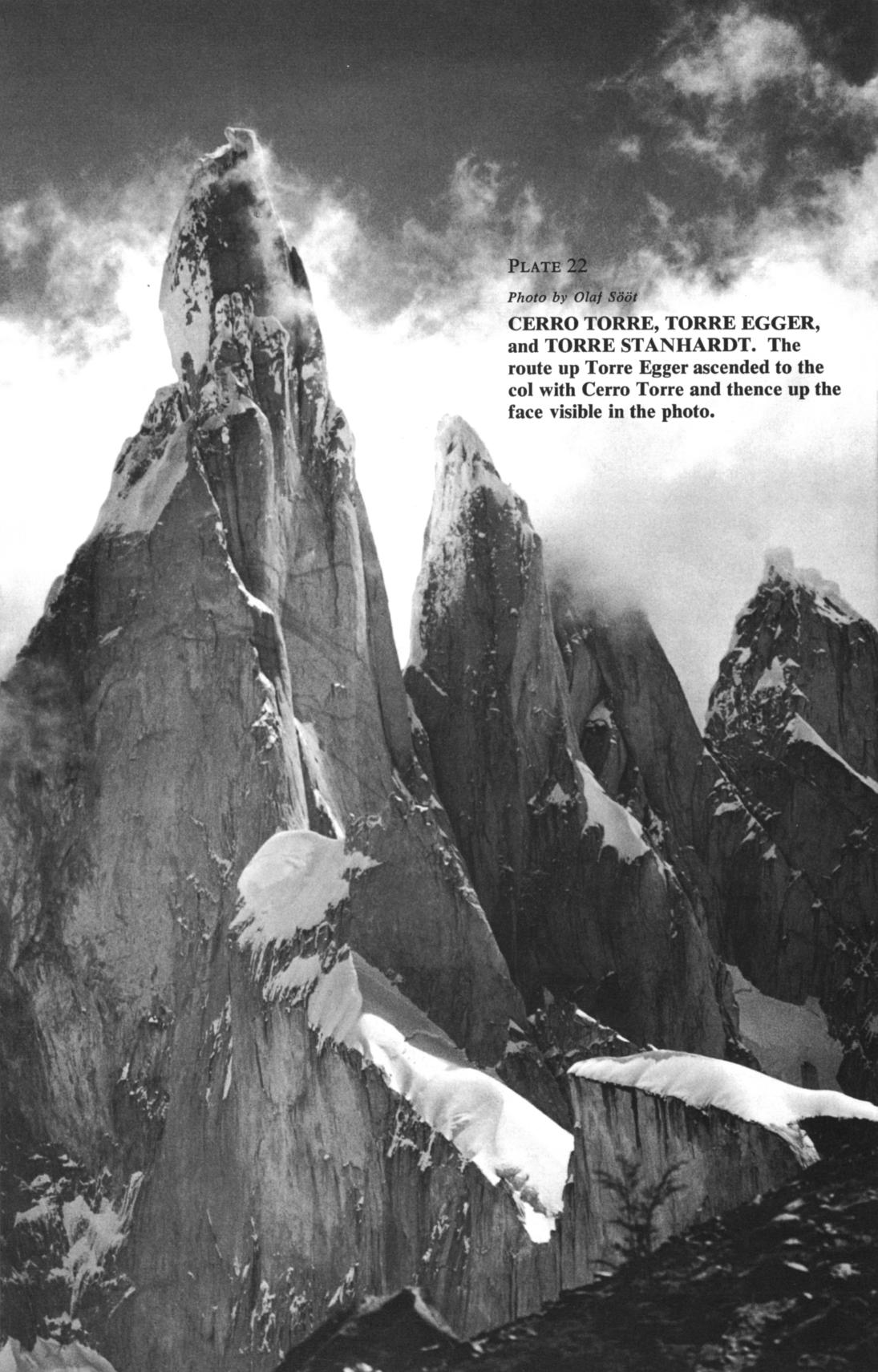


PLATE 22

Photo by Olaf Sööt

**CERRO TORRE, TORRE EGGER,
and TORRE STANHARDT.** The
route up Torre Egger ascended to the
col with Cerro Torre and thence up the
face visible in the photo.



PLATE 23

Photo by John Bragg

Donini leading on the large snowfield
below the col on Torre Egger. Summit
is on the right.

below the summit; and bones, this time human, on the glacier—Toni Egger's remains. Bits of cloth, a battered ice axe, carabiner, and the boot; a grisly reminder . . . (the carabiner's still with us; a flag for the summit). Cerro Torre loomed above the spot, a monolithic sentry, then and now. Our route will follow theirs until the Col of Conquest.

What was it that Maestri said about hope? ". . . the weapon of weaklings." Or was it ". . . of the poor"? I surely do a lot of hoping down here: hoping that the weather will improve, that my knees will withstand one more carry, that the route above the col will go, that the ice mushroom doesn't fall off, and that our money holds out to get us back to the States, and hoping. . . . More dust, this time rising about my ankles as they wobble under another pack load of rope and hardware: weapons of the rich. We're ready to engage the mountain—not so much a battle as a cat-and-mouse game: try to sneak in a few hundred feet of climbing when the weather drops its guard and isn't looking. Maybe if we are very quiet, we may slip by undetected for two or three days. The weather god down there is no fool. It's hard to climb unnoticed for long. Sooner or later, usually sooner, he creeps in like an unwanted guest. Tipped off by a shout of, "off belay!" or maybe some overenthusiastic hammering of a piton (climb clean). If you try to put in a bolt, it's all over. Regardless, the reaction is the same: little clouds appear over the col, and thicken. High clouds roar off the icecap, the wind screams down from the summits, and soon snow is flying simultaneously in three directions, and the mountains disappear, down, down . . . into the clouds.

Down into our snow cave, where canasta and reading pass the time. Back to Base Camp for provisions and a little luxury, then back to the snow cave. The weather finds us on the glacier this time, and it's back to Base. We've fixed only 600 feet of rope. Time passes: December and then January disappear in long days of cloud, rain and wind. We kill time as gracefully as possible, and shuffle back and forth between the road, Base Camp and the snow cave with endless loads of food, hardware and rope. The weather gets worse and we sit in our hut to avoid the torrential rains. January 21, and miraculously the weather clears. For the first time in many days, we see the mountain we have come to climb. Frantic activity replaces waiting, fatigue and boredom. The only remaining trace of our vanished snow cave, is the rope we had fixed at the entrance. After two days and thirty feet of digging, we recover our equipment—all our equipment—that had been interred by the blizzard and partial collapse of the bergschrund. Another interruption, as the weather asserts itself. But only two days later we are at last climbing again.

Jim leads. The climbing is mostly aid, very steep, but not too difficult. Progress is slow though, because everything is iced up by the weeks of

storm. Snow and ice plaster the mountain, and in the warming sun, the walls begin to run with water. The alpine silence is disturbed by the ominous helicopter sounds of falling ice. A large avalanche sweeps down off the east ridge of Cerro Torre to our left, and the walls of Egger to the right are continually scoured by cascading sheets of rime ice. The noise reaches a rush-hour crescendo which begins to quiet in the early afternoon as the sun disappears behind the summit of Torre Egger.

Another day's climbing and we reach the top of the large snowfield, over 1500 feet up. Another storm moves in, and we bow out, almost grateful for the rest in Base Camp. A week later interspersed with two harried days of climbing and hauling, we're back on the mountain—now about 1000 feet higher. As we work our way up slabs to the right of the deadly ice gully we'd hoped to climb, warmth and sun filter down through thick and lazily drifting clouds. The mountains echo with laughter: small ice crystals bounding and rebounding on their way to the glacier generate a constant static background for the dynamic tempo of rockfall, and the occasional ping against our helmets—Yes sir, we're paying attention. The percussion section on Torre Egger revives the symphony, while the ring of hardware and the scuffle of boot on rock highlight the day. One pitch blends into the next as we alternate leading, fixing ropes and hauling. The climbing is beautiful—mixed aid and free up perfect granite. I pendulum around a corner (shades of Yosemite), shattered as I am bombarded by ice from only ten feet above. Jay Wilson leads a pitch of weird exfoliated granite—like stacked dinner plates tilted at a crazy angle; slow aid in shallow bottoming cracks and grooves. The next day, Jim and I traverse into the top of the ice gully, safely above the avalanches which swept its lower sections, and climb to within 500 feet of the Col of Conquest. As we descend, refixing ropes down the slabs to the right of the gully, we meet Jay bringing a load of equipment up the ropes. He's subdued and shaken. A falling block of ice, refrigerator-sized, shattered in front of him; a narrow miss.

Exhausted and bruised, we dine at midnight in our candle-lit snow cave. Conversation is sparse, the ambience quiet, and the subject of detritus falling from above, taboo. We're almost to the col, and the summit sits close in our dreams.

The next night we huddle, buffeted by the wind, behind a makeshift snow wall on the Col of Conquest. The gleaming purple icecap stretches out below us, curving away to the edge of the world. Icy crystals float, puppet-like, about us, at the whim of the mountain. The wind howls in delight along the col as we fumble in the cold starlight, finding shelter and cooking supper. Eyes blurred by wind tears, I watch the stars gradually disappear at the horizon, and I burrow deeper into my Polar-guard cocoon. Morning breaks, a chiaroscuro of purple, pink and orange. Clouds froth on the summit of Fitz Roy and swirl down onto the col.

The Patagonia Storm Express is on schedule. Barely able to stand in the wind, we scramble to our beloved fixed ropes, clip in, and descend. Ten hours later, we are back in the forest sharing the peace and warmth of a wood fire.

Time becomes strangely distorted in Patagonia, dragging, our clock-works confused by the violent energies of the wind. Days march by slowly, solemnly, then suddenly the switch is thrown and with a great start, the days rush by in great disarray, piling into one another. Half of February slipped by unawares and we were suddenly running short of time, with the wall of Egger—the veritable crux of our climb—still untouched.

We pitched our box-tent some 2500 feet up the fixed ropes on February 16; the bittersweet taste of determination sharp on our tongues. Our nights were fitful and cramped; three large people crammed sardine-like into a tent designed for two; bothered and often tormented by the maddeningly incessant chatter of ice on the roof. The weather was dank and musty; our “home” filled with puddles and spilled food.

Our days . . . we climbed, pushing the ropes higher . . . one salient memory of Donini leading into the gathering mist and twilight. Three-and-a-half hours on a forty-foot, virtually blank, overhanging wall. Three hours of difficult aid, then a pendulum, more nailing and swinging, without success. Finally, a last-ditch lasso to gain a pedestal—the key to the upper wall.

A bright morning, with a thickening mist rising slowly, mysteriously, from the valleys far below, enveloping us in warm wetness. Water condenses everywhere; rivulets and streams trickle past us. We wandered torpidly upwards, lost in the thick clouds. Afraid to look up for any length of time, we try turtle-like to keep our heads close to our bodies, lest a marauding piece of ice snatch one away.

Through the clouds we catch occasional glimpses of the surreal bulk of Cerro Torre, and I envision Maestri and Egger descending in similar warm and treacherous conditions: a föhn wind melting the ice that had seduced them. I nervously finger Toni's 'biner in my pocket. Muffled thuds penetrate the mist and stentorian rumbles filter up from the glacier. The sounds of distant battle. We're besieged, above the raging armies, and the cannonade continues through the night.

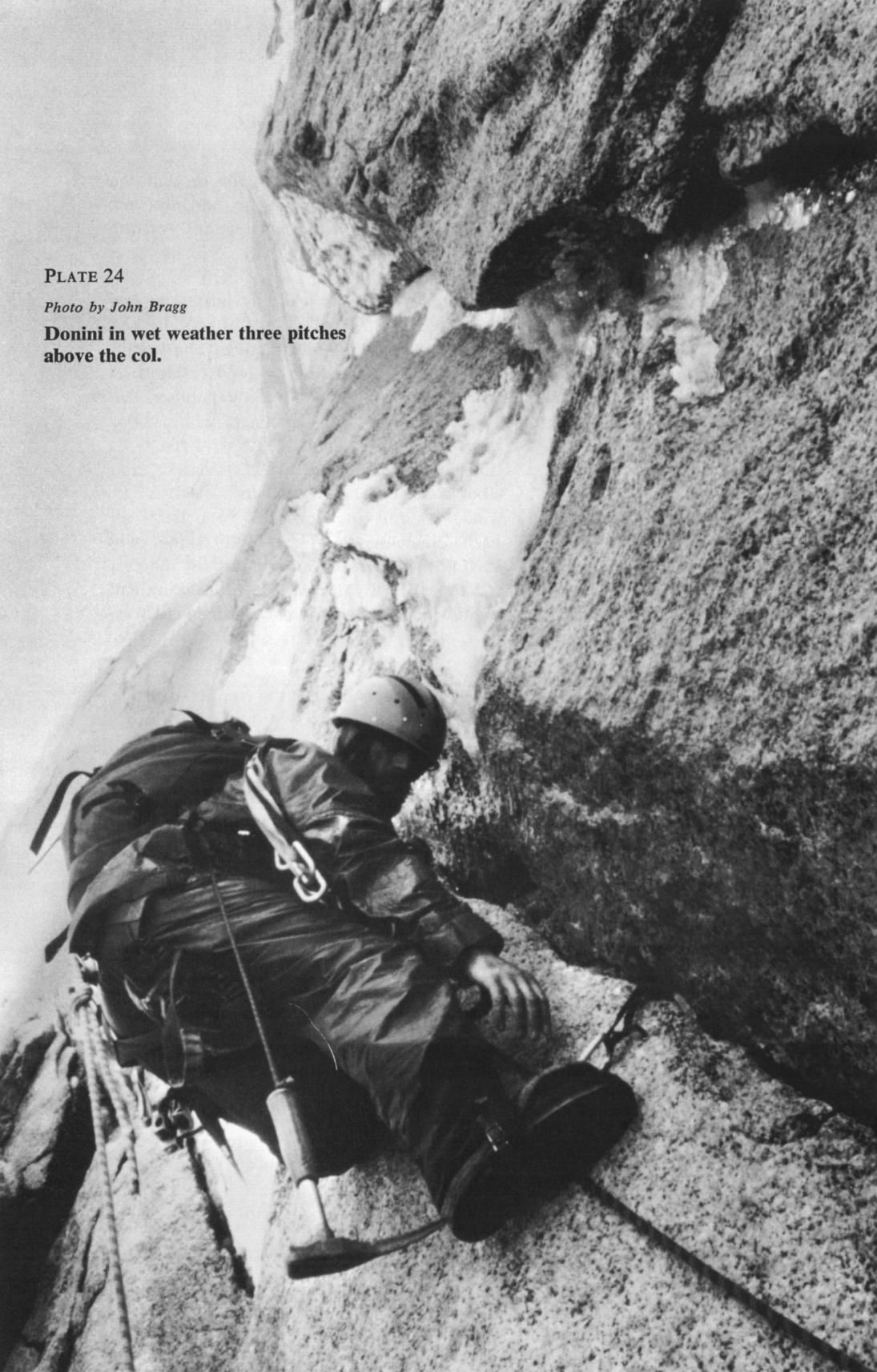
We awaken to silence and the sun; crystal bright and cold. We shiver, but rejoice in the perfect conditions. Our route begins to miraculously take shape: “I think I'd like to have a crack around this corner,” and there it is. “Let's do a long ice pitch, then belay from a good crack in that exposed section of rock,” and we do. No hauling to do, we each take a lead. The ice thickens as we climb higher; steely grey under huge white feathers of rime. We won't need our snow stakes.

That evening, higher still, we watched cirrus clouds drifting innocently

PLATE 24

Photo by John Bragg

**Donini in wet weather three pitches
above the col.**



—portent of the inevitable storm. Decision time: tonight or will the storm hold off until tomorrow? Visions of wandering in the dark, lost among jumbled ice mushrooms, haunt us as we grope upwards. In the middle of a hard mixed pitch, discretion takes the day. We descend, praying for just 24 more hours.

It started raining about midnight. A day's wait, as mist and rain collaborate to cover the world in ice. Crystallized strands of rope flecked with white rime stretch above us, vanishing into the clouds. The tumult all around us is deafening . . . ascenders scraping on ice-hawsers . . . milling clouds . . . rime forming on everything. Thickening clouds churn and boil, parting sporadically to reveal a deeper greyness within. For a brief moment, a ghostly apparition: the summit of Cerro Torre . . . voices in the clouds. . . . I finish my pitch begun two days earlier, and wait a pitch above as Jay takes over the lead from Jim.

Voices . . . lost in the wind. It's Jay—he's on top. Soon we're all there, laughing, pounding each other on the back, and taking silly pictures. It's late, 7:30, so leaving the carabiner as our summit marker, we descend, cleaning our fixed ropes, now cables of ice. Following Jay and Jim, I cut the ropes loose and watch as the wind carries them away.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Fitz Roy-Cerro Torre region, Patagonia near the frontier of Chile and Argentina.

FIRST ASCENT: Torre Egger, c. 9800 feet, December 1975 to February 1976; summit reached February 22, 1976 by whole Climbing Party.

PERSONNEL: *Climbing party:* John Bragg, John Donini, Jay Wilson; *Support party:* Maureen Donahue, Julie Hunter, Jane and Sherman Wilson.

