

Fitz Roy—Solo on the North Pillar

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IN JANUARY OF 1978 I went to Patagonia with an expedition of the Morbengo Section of the Italian Alpine Club, having as our objective the northwest face of Fitz Roy. As we approached the mountain, however, we realized that the few days at our disposal were not enough time to attempt this wall. We turned to the north pillar, which presented fewer difficulties of approach, but adverse weather and the hardness of the route compelled us to withdraw. The first contact with the wild and primitive land of Patagonia fascinated me to the point that I decided to return there as soon as possible.

In April of the same year some friends from Bormio joined with interest in my project, and so the expedition was underway. At the beginning it involved the participants alone, but soon an official cloak was given the project and it was named "The Expedition Contea CAI Bormio-Fitz Roy 1978-1979." The other members chosen were Luigi Zen and Giovanni Maiori, and the responsibility of leading was assigned to me. My wife was to form part of the expedition to handle logistics.

Finally on November 8, 1978 the expedition left Italy for Buenos Aires. From there, having completed the bureaucratic formalities, we flew to Río Gallegos, and from there, by truck, we reached Fitz Roy National Park. On November 20 we departed for Base Camp, eight miles distant, using the mules of the local constabulary for the transport of materials. We were so inspired by the good weather and the stupendous view of the mountain that, having rapidly established Base Camp, we departed immediately for Advanced Base Camp. As is customary for expeditions in Patagonia, we excavated an ice cave for an equipment depot and a refuge in case of bad weather.

On December 6 the unforeseen happened; the other two climbers quit the expedition. So severe and hostile an environment had destroyed their enthusiasm. Words were useless to dissuade them and to convince them at least to give it a try. Thus my wife and I remained alone to carry on as best we could. I was determined to try solo to climb our objective, the

north pillar, an untried route, having as my only similar experience that of the preceding year on the north face of Huascarán Norte in the Peruvian Andes. Consequently I did nothing but await the weather.

The weather worsened rapidly and with such intensity that we had to move Base Camp, since the wind had destroyed the tent. We were able to organize ourselves in a log cabin, transporting there with hard work all the gear. Notwithstanding the bad weather, I succeeded in climbing back up as far as the notch between the pillar and the peak Val del Biois, ascending a couloir of mixed ice, snow and rock of about 1000 feet. Here I pitched a bivouac tent to which I would return every night in order to climb back up along the fixed ropes the following day.

In the succeeding days an improvement in the weather not being foreseen, I decided to see how far I could proceed safely. I managed to climb 200 feet and immediately became aware of how hard it was to climb in such conditions, with the violent wind that struck from every side, the stinging and torturing snow, and fingertips that turned to ice when I climbed bare-handed. I decided to fix the greater part of the climb with rope to insure retreat.

Only on January 1, 1979 did the conditions improve enough to let me resume the ascent. As in my preceding solo climbs, I used a system of dynamic self-belays to guarantee my safety. I climbed thus for 500 feet along dihedrals, cracks and chimneys, encountering the hardest free climbing. The following day I proceeded for another 500 feet, reaching, always with great difficulty, the top of an enormous dihedral.

The third day the sky was covered and the wind rose, rendering progress slow, and for that reason I succeeded in gaining only 350 feet up the ever-present cracks and chimneys that characterize this wall. The pitch was stupendous. If it had not been for the ice that in places completely filled the cracks, it would have been possible to climb it all free. One thing that struck me was the absolute absence of sharp edges usually found in granite. I observed how on this pillar the violent wind and the formation of ice smooth the surface.

On January 4, following the edge of the east corner of the pillar for 500 feet, I climbed into a dihedral and thence, having ascended numerous cracks and the final steps, I reached the summit of the north pillar at a little less than 10,000 feet. From there I descended to the bivouac tent. During the night bad weather returned. I remained where I was for a full day in hope of an improvement in the weather.

It was actually better on January 6. I departed at seven o'clock in the morning, armed with a movie and a still camera, hoping to ascend to the summit of Fitz Roy, but it took so long to replace some of the fixed ropes and to document the climb that I did not get to the top of the pillar until in the afternoon. I began the traverse to gain the face of the main summit, finding unforeseen difficulties, which included three arduous pen-

PLATE 6

Photo by Renato Casarotto

FITZ ROY. The route ascended
the right skyline.



dulums. I climbed late into the night by the light of my headlamp, battered by the wind and falling ice. Seeing that the cold of night did not keep ice from falling, I descended into the notch between the pillar and the main summit. Toward dawn a strong, wet wind rapidly covered the rock with *verglas*. At dawn I began the descent, overcoming almost insuperable difficulties to reach the bivouac tent.

After making radio contact with my wife, I continued on down to Base Camp, where continual stormy weather forced me into inactivity. On January 17 I climbed back up anew to the base of the pillar, where I found the tent destroyed. I prepared as best I could to pass the night. The following day I proceeded on toward the summit of the pillar, repairing some ropes frayed by the wind. This time as well, along the face of the main summit, I had to work till late at night on account of the damage caused by bad weather. It was very late when I descended to my tentless bivouac in the notch. Toward dawn I regained my high point and thence I followed numerous cracks and dihedrals with the greatest difficulties yet encountered because the walls were completely covered with snow and ice. Finally, on the afternoon of January 19, I gained the summit. Having taken the ritual photographs, I hastened to descend and in the afternoon of the following day I returned to the mini Base Camp and to my wife.

In going over these notes, I cannot avoid comparing technical considerations with personal ones. From a strictly mountaineering point of view, I can say that in ten active years I had never lived through such a total experience. On this wall I had to overcome extreme technical difficulties under the most continuous foul weather. The equipment and food I had were what is usually used on Alpine climbs, but I also had impermeable Gore-Tex clothing. This adventure confirmed in my mind that to succeed in ascents of noteworthy difficulty it is indispensable to integrate oneself into the surroundings. That is to say that one must know how to determine the most propitious conditions for the ascent so that one's physical and psychological energies are not dissipated in long waits.

To my wife, who was infinitely patient and understanding, I dedicate the summit of the north pillar of Fitz Roy. From now on I shall call it the Goretta Pillar.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Patagonian Andes, Argentina.

NEW ROUTE: Fitz Roy, 11,072 feet, via North Pillar, January 19, 1979
(Renato Casarotto).