

Cerro Stanhardt

JAMES BRIDWELL

FIVE DAYS AFTER LEAVING LOS ANGELES, Elisa Moran, Greg Smith, Jay Smith and I arrived at Fitz Roy National Park in the heart of Patagonia, the promised land. The promise is bad weather, but that of course allowed us time to make the necessary back-breaking load carries to Base Camp near the toe of the Torre Glacier. It was almost nine years to the day since I had climbed the then elusive ice mushrooms of the Cerro Torre, and I looked forward to new adventures of the same magnitude.

The weather was abnormally warm when we arrived at Park Headquarters. As I staggered to Base Camp under the essential loads, it was excessively hot at the lower elevations and sweat ran off my forehead, stinging my eyes. The few clouds that prevailed cloaked the upper half of the Torres in the usual fashion. I have a theory that if there is one cloud anywhere in the world, it will be over those three amazing towers.

We set up camp at my favorite location, after which, the weather dictating our reality, restless frustration structured our lives. Days became weeks. Jay became the weather man. He recorded barometric changes, wind direction, cloud formations. Religious reverence was given to these data, fortunately while eating Elisa's fabulous crêpes. Infrequent breaks in the weather would allow us the odd load, which would give an advantage for a meaningful attempt when the weather did improve. These occasional forays afforded the opportunity to meet the other climbing personalities in this magical place, the famous and the unknown seeking the test of Patagonia, and, in so doing, becoming a small, close community.

Following the basic laws of probability, the weather finally became clear and the four of us struck out for a go. For me the prime objective is to go where nearly no one else has gone and in good style. To climb Cerro Stanhardt would accomplish both of these goals. Firstly, it was unclimbed. Secondly, none of the Torres had been done alpine-style on a first ascent.

The approach to the Torres is short, 14 kilometers, but arduous. A world-class ice skater, gymnast, bongo boarder, runner, skate boarder, skier, climber and mule would have only minor difficulties.

Elisa is a veteran of rock climbing in the USA and trekking in Nepal, but she had never had to carry her own 40-pound pack with all the necessary life-support systems in it and had always been spoiled by having a trail to follow. It was

PLATE 21

Photo by Gino Buscaini

**AGUJA DESMOCHADA. Bivouacs
are marked.**



hideous for her, but she survived with only occasional disillusionments. Greg and Jay reached the rock caves before Elisa and me and started excavating the new snow that was windpacked inside. The Smith brothers I called them. Though not related, they share the same surname. One look at them would leave serious doubts as to their kinship. Greg hails from the South and sports associated speech characteristics in addition to a firm belief that one centimeter is the most functional length for hair, a belief drafted while serving in the military. Jay is the multipurpose functional type, much like me but in a smaller package. His determination and wide range of abilities and experience made him optimally endowed for this climbing role.

We started up the glacier above shortly after dawn after a not so restful sleep. We roped up immediately in memory of New Zealander Phil Herron, who died in a crevasse while attempting the first ascent of Torre Egger. The new snow obscured lurking crevasses and simultaneously made heavy work of our progress. A couple of hours before dark, we situated ourselves in a bergschrund, thankful that the tedious, crevasse-riddled glacier was behind us. Jay and I continued climbing in order to give ourselves a morning headstart. Greg volunteered to cut a cave of sorts in the bergschrund where a roof could be fashioned.

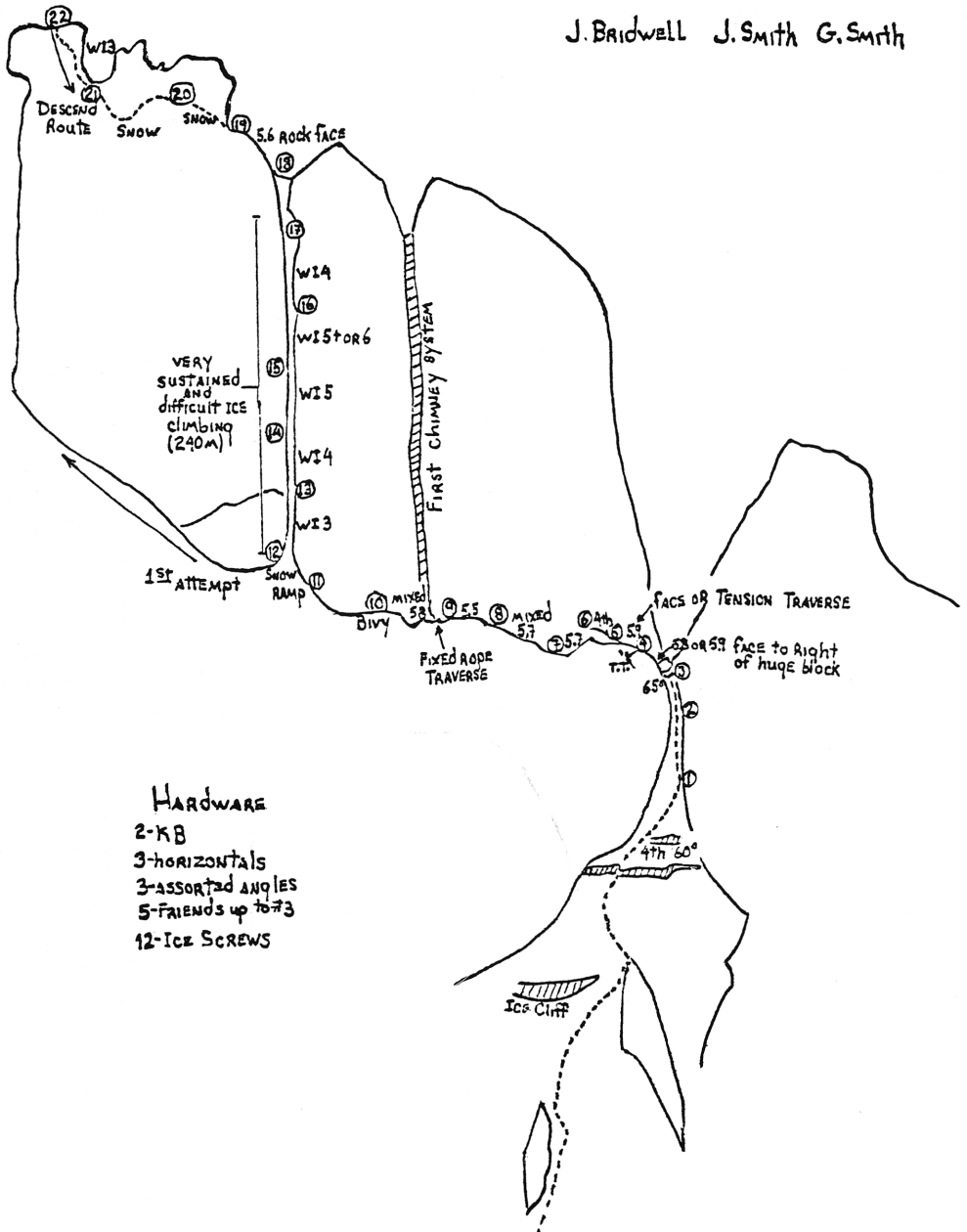
After fixing three-and-a-half rope-lengths, Jay and I soloed down the remaining 200 feet of 60° ice, arriving at the bergschrund to discuss the next day's game plan with Greg and Elisa. Elisa opted to remain in the security of the bergschrund, feeling a bit spent from the day's efforts and not wishing to slow the push for the summit. Greg, Jay and I decided to make an all-out charge for the top.

Jay had a rude awakening in the morning when part of the overhead canopy inconveniently dropped off, half burying him while he was cooking the morning meal. At the same moment, two other eager climbers arrived, taking advantage of our track up the glacier and our fixed ropes. Breakfast was postponed and an unwelcome race was on. We passed our guests in the couloir, but as the climbing became more difficult, our threesome had a disadvantage in keeping pace with the two of them. After some eight pitches, their route diverged and the pressure of tense competition eased. They were nice guys but. . . .

The weather had taken a turn for the worse. We continued up the huge ramp system which slashes the east face and leads to what I had been told would be moderate mixed climbing on the south wall of Stanhardt. This was not the case and after some extreme climbing in extreme conditions, we turned tail and commenced a typically epic Patagonian descent in typically epic Patagonian weather. A tired and tattered trio returned at 1:30 A.M. to an anxious Elisa. The glacier was moving at an incredible rate and had considerably modified our humble accommodations. The rest of the night was uncomfortable at best. The next day, we descended in perfect weather without alternative, having no food or fuel. We did the beer hall crawl to await the next spell of good weather, which we prayed would come before our departure date.

CERRO STANDHARDT 1st ASCENT
 "Exocet" GRADE VI 5.9 WI6 1-29-88

J. BRIDWELL J. SMITH G. SMITH



HARDWARE

- 2-KB
- 3-HORIZONTALS
- 3-ASSORTED ANGLES
- 5-FRIENDS up to #3
- 12-ICE SCREWS

COLOR PLATE 4

Photo by James Bridwell

East Face of CERRO STANHARDT.



Elisa didn't make the time slot and had to return to the States. We were now only three and decided to raise the ante. The time was ripe to put it all on the line and go for an alpine-style ascent. We whittled down the food, gear, fuel and clothing to a minimum and poised at the starting line, waiting for the barometric starting gun to fire. After two false starts, we were off. A steeper, more direct approach, which sometimes stressed realistic unroped climbing, brought us to the col early in the day. Here we unfurled the cords and leashed up. The climbing had changed considerably. What had been easy snow ramps had become poorly protected rock slabs, but familiar terrain produced greater speed, with Greg in the lead. An early bivouac was established after two hours of chopping ice platforms.

Jay soloed around the corner to have a look at the choice of route, while Greg and I put the evening's fare on the cooker. Jay returned with chilling stories of what he had seen. "It looks great," he exclaimed with abundant enthusiasm. "It looks like vertical and overhanging ice and I want the first four leads," he stated with an air of proclamation.

"Judging by your description," I said, "we can't come to blows over it."

He looked at me with a curious wry smile and said, "It will come to blows. It's funnel in there and there's no place for you lads to hide. Everything I knock off is going to come right at you."

"We'll make a place to hide," I announced, having already considered that position. "We'll hang the packs horizontally over our heads, one outside the other. That should do the trick."

Doubt is the seed of failure, and success the fruit of faith and courage. I hadn't come to Patagonia expecting a promenade. I had been here before and was aware of what it would take to get the job done. I had conjured the correct images and now it was time for them to be born. A few bumps and bruises weren't going to stop us. Jay and Greg shared the tiny tent while I settled into my little scoop on the ice shelf that formed my perch. I tried to calm the tension of excitement within and get some rest for the night.

We awoke to a special dawn and were off after a quick brew-up. Jay took the helm on the business end of the cord as he had demanded. He is one of the best ice men in North America and when you want to win, you don't field the second team. The lead was his until he turned it over. There would be no ego games.

Jay dispatched the first pitch and Greg and I quickly followed. Above us reared a spectacle. A twisted elevator shaft soared upward, glistening at the back. A narrow wall of glass bulged and curved ever so curiously, precluding the complete view. What we could see was a test indeed, but that which is hidden is always the most frightening, the ever unknown. The first sixty feet were only about 80° to 85° but then the face steepened to a real arm-pumping angle. Hanging from one hand which gripped a single ice tool, Jay would stab a screw into a shallow dimple made with the other axe. It would stick out precariously, threatening to fall before he could drive it home. No cheater slings for hanging on, to ease the task. "It must all be free," was Jay's war cry. At the top of this pitch, jammed in a two-foot slot, we bumped and jostled each other as we

1st Ascent

J. BRIDWELL J. SMITH G. DUNMIRE

2-12-68

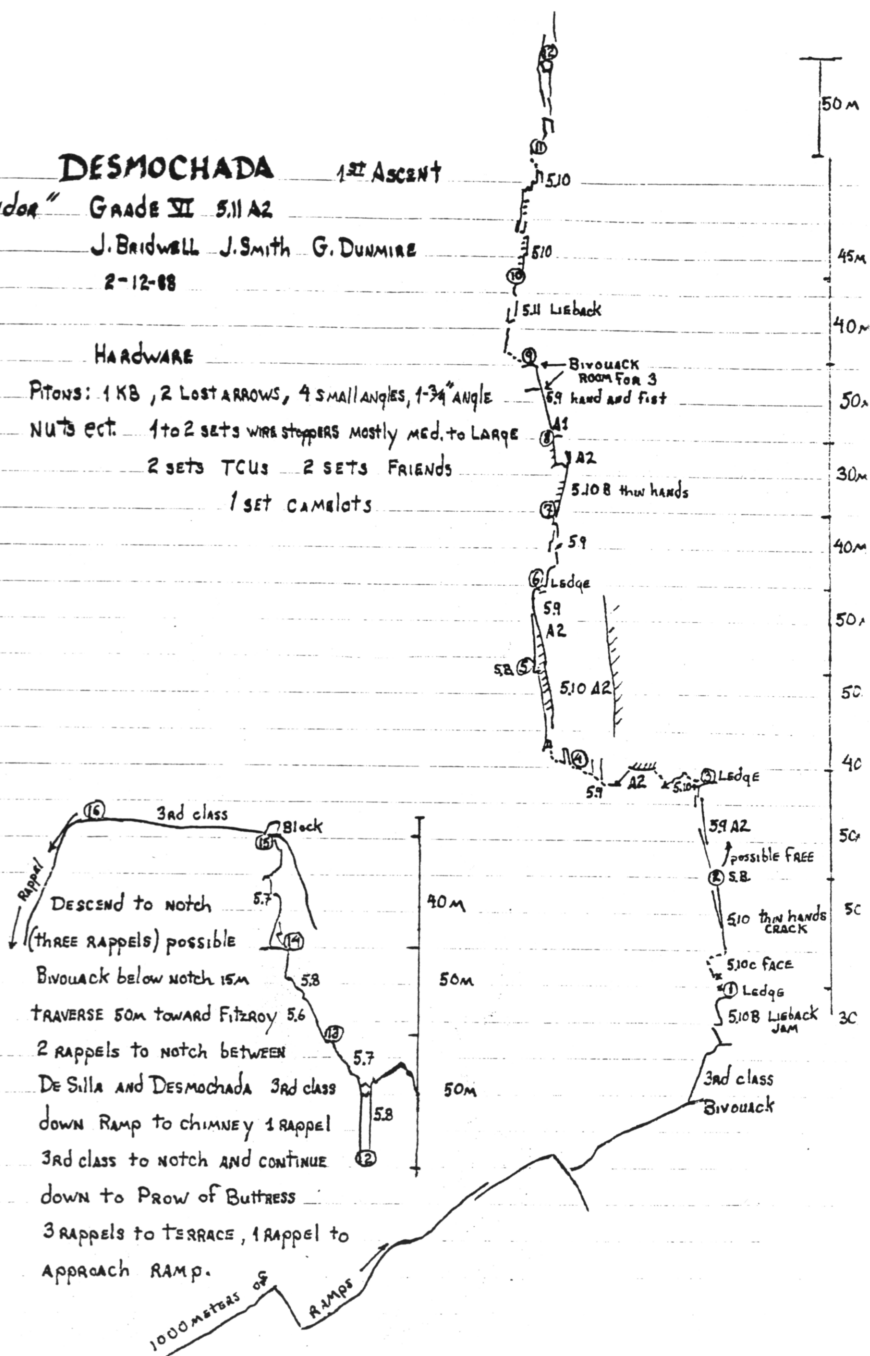
HARDWARE

Pitons: 1 KB, 2 Lost Arrows, 4 Small Angles, 1-3/4" Angle

Nuts ect. 1 to 2 sets wire stoppers mostly med. to large

2 SETS TCUs 2 SETS FRIENDS

1 set Camelots



arranged the packs overhead. At once Jay struck out again onto the mirrored surface. His arms burned once more with lactic fire as he pushed the perimeter of the envelope another time. How much more could he take? The pitch after this was even worse. I could see the grim pain echo through his face as he pulled from axe to hammer, hammer to axe. Swinging at the concrete surface like an exhausted boxer in the fifteenth round of a championship fight, he hung on, struggling for control over distant limbs.

The pick of the tool struck again and again before securing penetration. The valiant battle continued. "Ice!" he yelled. A serving platter came crashing toward us. I drove my body against the wall, seeking safety under the sack, but it was not good enough. I groaned with the brutal impact. This hadn't been the first. My back was bruised and sore from other errant missiles. Belaying was not without cost.

Jay fought to place another screw, stemming wildly behind him. His crampon points scratched for purchase in the thin veneer of ice. With the clip-in made, he informed us that this was the most screws he had ever placed on an ice pitch. He was a little over halfway up. Three screws later, it was over, the rope was anchored and he called us up. When I reached the belay, Jay gestured toward the opposite wall which had overhung our heads all the while. From it, a 30-foot column of ice clung precariously by the mere top two feet of its ponderous bulk. Water could be seen running behind it. Hmm, sometimes you have the luck; or do you make it? The haunting question is, what is fate and what do you create?

Jay turned over the lead, no longer capable of holding the tools. Greg's silence told me that I was up. Though not the most difficult, the next lead certainly offered the most misery. The surface of the ice was soft and spongy, running with water, while rain ran from toothy icicles that hung in curtains overhead. Into the fanged maw I gingerly ventured. Why me? Why do I seem to have a penchant for this type of situation? I cursed and pressed upward. In seconds I was soaked to my boots. Protection was poor. The ice was now separated into narrow runnels between rock ribs. I tried placing a screw but it was no good. I had to go for it. I couldn't stay in this waterfall any longer. Ice was forming outside my clothing, flaking off like breadcrust when I moved.

Mounting a steep bulge, I rushed for shelter under and behind some giant icicles. A 30-foot vertical and overhanging section waited above. I placed a screw and made a dash for it. Coming out and around the hanging teeth was awkward and dangerous, but I managed, dislodging only one tooth. My forearms were already bulging with blood. I marveled at Jay's endurance. Stemming against the rock, I felt the final overhang redline my pumpometer. Like a half-drowned cat, I dragged myself up the final section, anchored the ropes and waited in the shadows, shivering. Jay, and then Greg came up on the Jümars. The ropes were glazed with ice and each climber had to be rescued with another rope when his ascender clogged with ice and refused to hold.

Three more pitches went quickly before dark. I thrashed with rigging anchors for the descent while Jay started the last pitch, short but steep. He worked around the summit overhang and in a few minutes stood on the top.

With no anchor available, he used his body to secure the rope. Last up, I pulled over the final wall and ran to congratulate my friends. I extended my hand to Jay. He passed it by and embraced me with a great hug. The sky was aglow and so were our spirits. We looked at the higher summits of the Torre Egger and the Cerro Torre, awash with the setting sun. They looked so close, but I knew better. Only three shots left in the camera and \$1000 photos everywhere you looked. Who cared? We had done it. All we had to do was to get down.

Twenty-three-and-a-half hours after leaving the bivouac we returned, three tired but happy lads.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Fitz Roy Region, Patagonia, Argentina.

FIRST ASCENTS: Cerro Stanhardt, 2800 meters, 9186 feet, First Complete Ascent, including the Summit Mushroom, via East Face; Summit reached on January 29, 1988; VI, 5.10, A1 (Bridwell, Greg Smith, Jay Smith).

Aguja Desmochada, via the ramp and dihedral on the West Face, February 8 to 13, 1988; 15 pitches, 5.11, A2 (Bridwell, Jay Smith, Dunmire).

PERSONNEL: James Bridwell, Glen Dunmire, Elisa Moran, Greg Smith, Jay Smith.

