

Paine—Tales from the Dark Side

JAY SMITH

January 5, 1989

As the first crimson rays of dawn crept under a thin veneer of clouds marking the next oncoming front, Jim Bridwell and I hesitantly plowed through hip-deep snow up the glacier towards our 1500-foot of fixed rope. Small powder avalanches turned to a fine mist as they became airborne down the Fortress' 6000-foot east face. The last ten-day storm had encased the wall in glistening armor and there now hung a massive icicle from a snowfield a quarter of the way up our route. It just lay there quietly and threatened to peel off and obliterate anyone foolish enough to tread under it.

An hour later what we had hoped would drop we now prayed would stay. Just as we started up the ropes, a loud crack pierced the silence. The multi-ton menace had parted from its perch and accelerated earthbound.

"Ice!" I shouted and frantically swung left behind a pillar as far as the taut ropes allowed, leaving only a portion of my shoulder exposed. It landed a blow with the force of Mike Tyson and pain engulfed my right side, but it was taken as a good sign that I was still alive.

When all grew quiet, I called to Bridwell, fearing he might not have been as fortunate in finding shelter from the volley. After several moments, a small cone of snow atop a helmet rose from the dihedral below. We stared at each other, wincing in pain and then broke into nervous laughter. "Guess it's safe now!" he mused and began digging ice out of his collar.

We reached the high point at the base of the snowfield in half an hour. Jim quickly led out across the cratered slope with an aerial minefield suspended above. A whine like that of a helicopter's rotor again broke the silence and transformed into the whirl of stonefall. "Rock!" I screamed before burying my head ostrich-like under the illusive protection of my gloved hands. From pea-shooter to bowling balls, all traveling at terminal velocity, the Fortress' defences now had us ducking more than climbing. When I saw one exterminator miss Jim by inches, we both began to wonder at the sanity of our attack. As we bobbed and weaved in the next belay, few words were spoken before we began a rapid descent. The bastards from above were nearing their mark and at the rate of fire would inevitably zero in soon.

January 12, 1989

We were now back at the base of the Central Tower of Paine for a second time with our sights set on an alpine-style gem. But the Paines main defense system,

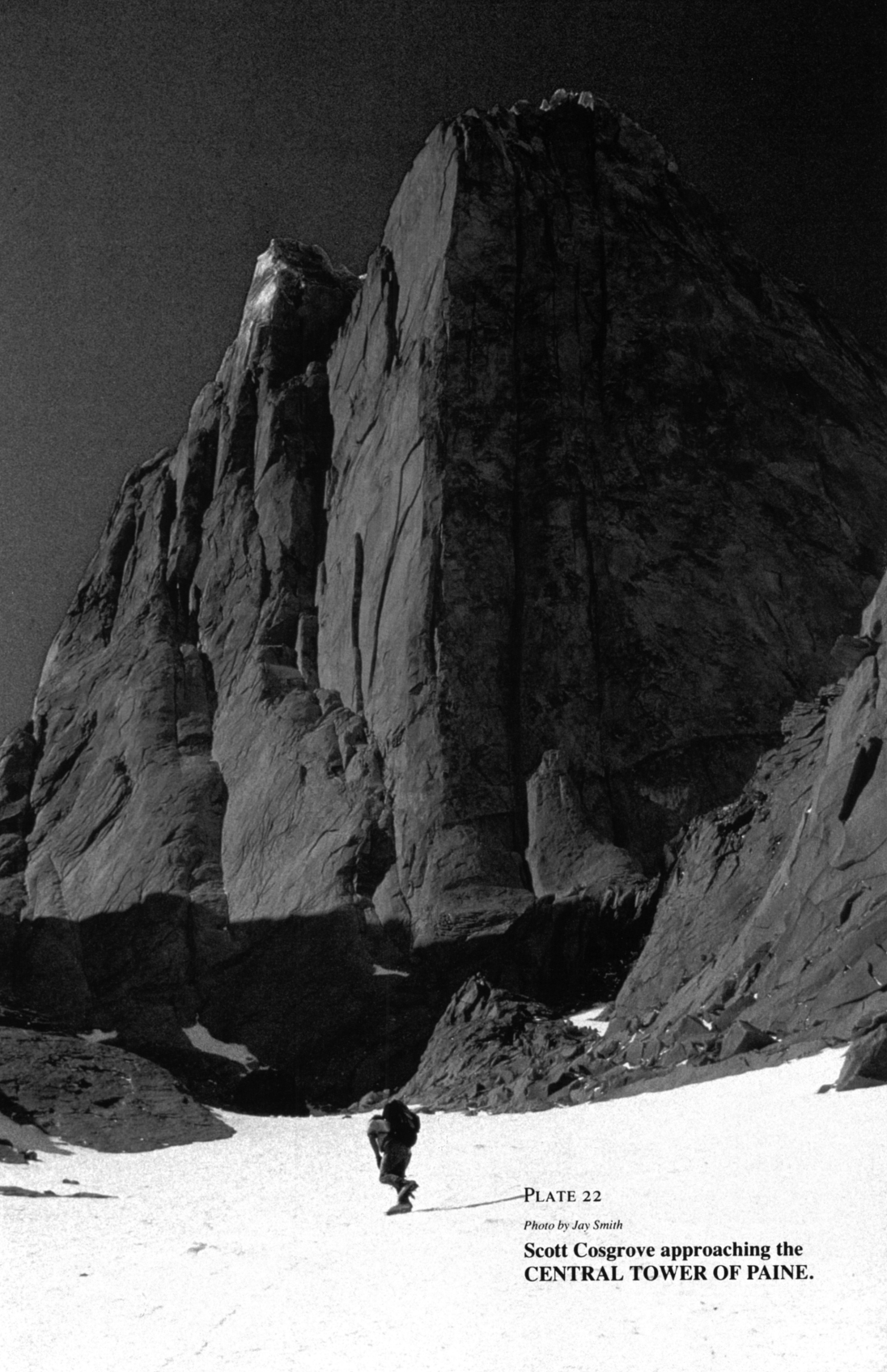


PLATE 22

Photo by Jay Smith

**Scott Cosgrove approaching the
CENTRAL TOWER OF PAINE.**

the weather, was in full alert and had us pinned down and under heavy fire. With the wind hammering our position, I peered out the tiny hole in my bivy sack and could see the red granite walls above. Our intended route lay somewhat to the left, but directly above rose a perfect prow which disappeared near the mist-shrouded summit, 2700 feet above. Steep flakes and cracks ascended its edge and then continued upward into the next storm. Although not our chosen line, it would be foremost in my mind in the months to come. We hadn't dealt the deck; we could only play the percentages and as we descended empty-handed once more, I vowed to return to bag that precious jewel.

November 17, 1989

My fear of returning to Patagonia for the third time had nothing to do with climbing. I had relied on Bridwell's "mastery" of Spanish to get us to and from the mountains. Now, with Scott Cosgrove and Greg Epperson "habla-ing" only the slang they had picked up in southern California, I kept my pocket Berlitz dictionary within easy grasp.

Our friend Víctor had agreed to drive us from Punta Arenas to the park in his mini-truck. When he saw the small mountain of loads we were going to heave into it, despair swept his face like the winds of the Hielo Continental. He rambled on in incomprehensible lingo all the time, shaking his head. With babbling Spanish, we pleaded ignorance and proceeded to chuck the truck full till the springs rested securely against the frame. Then at a Mach speed of 35, we raced out of town toward the Paine group, twelve hours away.

We had just finished repacking for the third time when Pepe, our gaucho, rode into camp. I had to ask him the question that had plagued me from when we had last spoken. "How was the weather after we left?"

"Soon after you go, we have four good days. I thin' that was March."

Since we had departed in January, I now felt that it had been wise to fold our hand before the stakes had risen higher. Now, eleven months later, and with those being the only good days of the year, things were bound to improve.

We all worked hard for three days rebuilding our hut, the only one standing in the Japanese Camp. It's called the Japanese Camp because they were the ones who built it in 1987 for an attempt on a tower. We had come prepared to build our own, had it been occupied, but since it wasn't, we laid claim to it at once.

When Nebeta and Kadoya, our two new Japanese neighbors, dumped their loads at our doorstep and asked to share "our" home, I had to hesitate before giving a reply. The idea of five of us packed into the micro shelter for two months just didn't cut it. We needed the space. As they cooked dinner in the rain under their makeshift leanto, I wondered if these two dudes had built the hut in the first place.

November 20, 1989

In Patagonia one must use every moment of climbable weather. Our first carry sat patiently waiting by the door as I periodically rushed in and out of my tent, checking the night sky. With the barometer rising and the rain letting up, we

A black and white photograph of a massive, craggy mountain peak. The rock face is dark and textured, with a prominent vertical crack running down its center. Patches of snow are visible on the lower slopes and in the foreground. The sky is filled with dramatic, swirling clouds, with a bright area of light breaking through near the top of the peak.

PLATE 23

Photo by Jay Smith

**CENTRAL and SOUTH TOWERS
OF PAINE.** Route ascended the
shade-sun line on the Prow.

raced up the trail as the morning light crossed the Pampas. After a four-hour approach across miles of moraine and up a 3000-foot couloir, we arrived at the base of the tower. I was so excited to put boot to rock that I failed to evaluate the mixed terrain until I was 80 feet up. I cautiously downclimbed what had felt dicy on the way up. Relieved, Scott smiled and handed me the cord.

We fixed three pitches in deteriorating conditions and then rappelled as the winds grew to hurricane force.

November 23, 1989

The dawn had been phenomenal. Under perfect skies, we passed two Italian teams still getting out of their bivouacs, then sprinted up the couloir and jumared to the top of our ropes.

Scott is without question an outstanding free climber, and I had lured him to Patagonia with tales of the first free ascent of the Central Tower. But I had also warned him of the atrocious weather and the necessity of climbing fast. I, having freed the first three moderate pitches, turned him loose on what we thought might be one of the crux leads. I sat shivering in the belay and watched three Italians summit the North Tower as Scott bouldered out on the next sequence. "I'll get this move on the next try," he assured me.

"How does it look above?"

"Not too bad. I've almost got it."

But an hour later, after clocking a 30-footer and inching the rope another 40 feet, I knew that we had to start covering some ground. An additional 2000 feet of rock rose above us and as the best day I'd seen in two years disappeared behind the next front, Scott shook out on a foothold and chalked for the next moves.

I didn't care about a 5.12 base route. I wanted this summit and verbalized my thoughts as such. High above, he had nearly completed what must rank as one of the hardest pitches in the Paine group and instead of encouragement, all he heard was bitching from below.

The next pitch started out reasonably, a shattered hand crack through a loose roof. A few feet higher things became desperate. I got pumped trying to slot an RP and tried the moves twice before grabbing the piece. I pulled through and then managed to free the rest of the pitch. In saving maybe a few minutes, I had botched our all-free ascent.

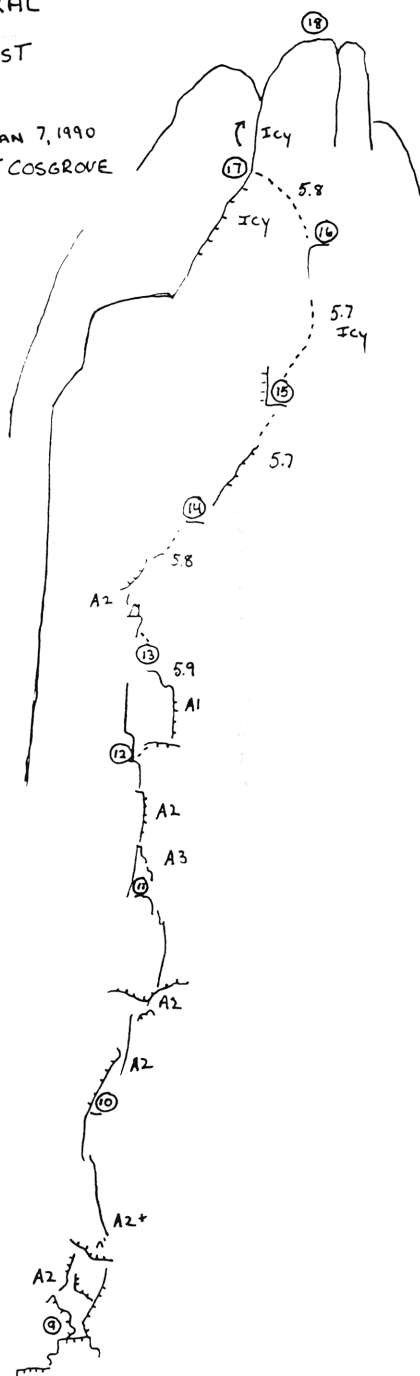
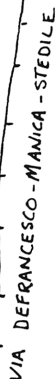
Of course Scott had seen me yarding but had refrained from any verbal abuse. He didn't say much either as he snatched the rack and headed for the off-width above. I noticed he weighted a piece or two as he fought with the leaning 6-inch crack. I guess I had annoyed him with my feeble effort to continue the route all-free. Now it appeared that he didn't care, figuring I'd blown the chance for the great ascent. He fixed the rope at the end of his lead and prepared to descend as the weather closed in once more.

Admittedly conditions were rapidly deteriorating. The Fortress was no longer visible across the valley, being the first always to catch the storms, but it was only snowing lightly on us and we could possibly gain a few more feet

WILD, WILD, WEST

First Ascent - JAN 7, 1990

JAY SMITH, SCOTT COSGROVE



before the inevitable struck. As I arrived at Scott's belay, he grabbed the free line and booked down the ropes, leaving me to sort out and cache our gear as all hell broke loose from the sky.

Gaining the last rope, Scott leaned back to start the final rappel only to drop fifteen feet before it again caught. A directional pin I had placed behind a small flake had pulled and he cursed me under his breath. When I finally caught him at the base, he lectured me in piton craft and explained how a second Italian team had trundled several sizable stones his way. He was not having "a nice day."

We continued down the couloir to the tent platform we had built a few days before. Greg had been laboriously adding inches to its width while we had been on the wall. Now, when we rolled out the tent, a mere half of it hung over the edge. Scott stared at me in horror, figuring it was probably his half and, hastily repacking, made a beeline for the glacier. I frantically chased after him searching for a new site. Three hundred feet lower, I spied our last hope. A wee ledge on the sidewall was quickly excavated before we erected the tent.

All night the storm raged relentlessly, occasionally lifting us completely off the ground. I awoke to the deafening roar of spindrift. We bid our tent farewell and butt-slid 2600 feet in a record 60 seconds.

December 11, 1989

Scott now began to realize how Patagonia had got its bad rep. After 19 days of ceaseless storm, the morning displayed signs of improvement. Two pots of coffee later, we risked a chance of climbing. En route to the ropes, we saw that the clouds were lifting and the wind was now a mere whisper. Timing is so critical to catch a good spell, but being too eager could be as fatal as sleeping in on a summit day.

We lost one precious hour bandaging a hit our tent had taken. With a misguided hook that had scored a strike, a grapefruit-sized rock lay entangled in nylon. Another hour later, the great weather changed for the worse as we regained our high point. Encased in a triple layer of clothing, I aided what would have gone free an hour ago. One hundred feet out, I was down to a couple of wires and screamed senselessly at Scott as the words blew away. Unable to communicate, I anchored to what I could and we slid down the ropes to the sanctuary of our tent.

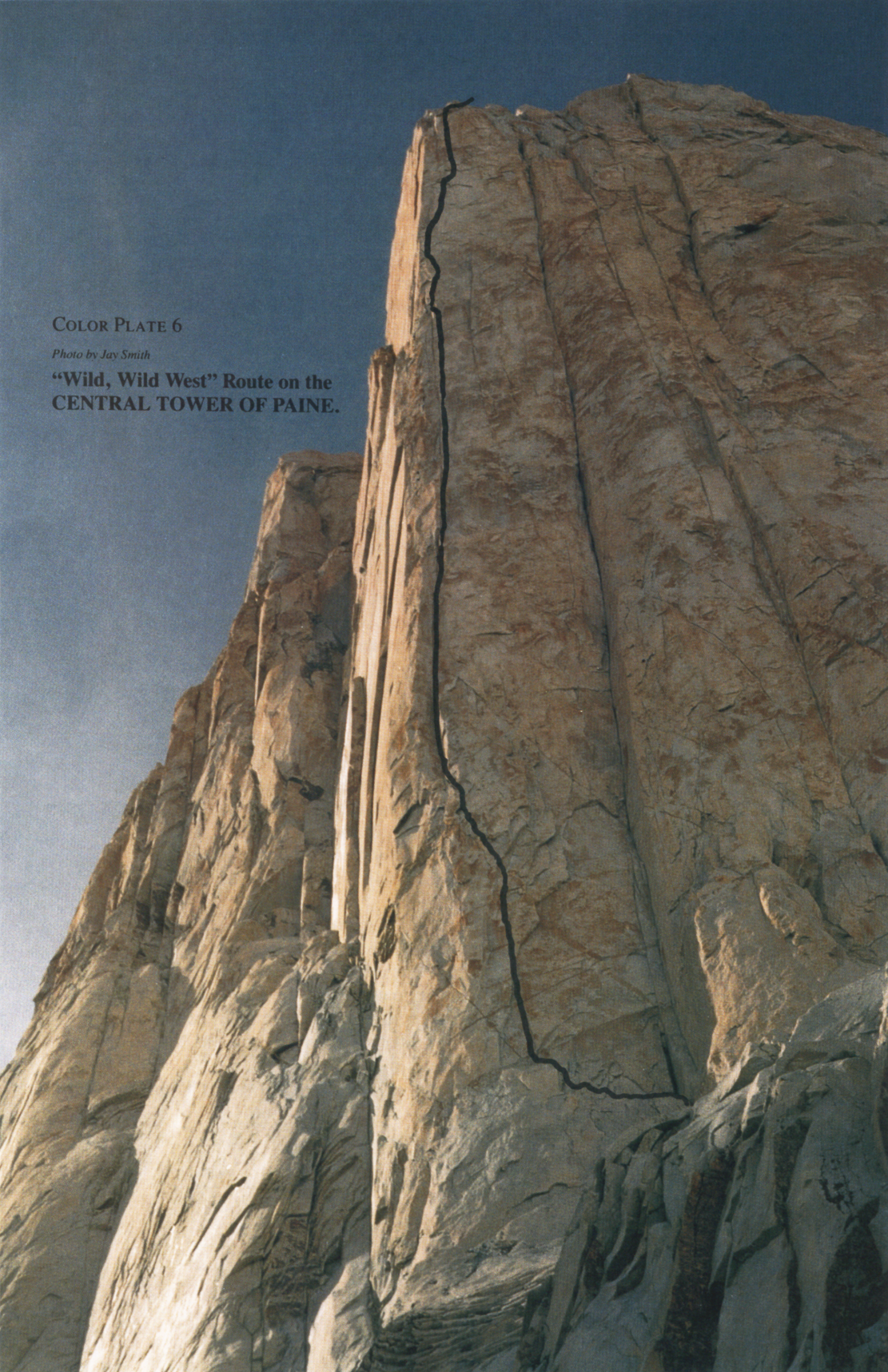
Morning arrived as did the Japanese, a soloist for the North Tower and a duo for the Central. We peered from the tent and watched them stagger and stall in punishing spindrift well short of the notch, aptly called Col Bich. As they retreated, the sky began to clear and within minutes of their departure, we dashed back up the ropes. Our tent was the key to the attack.

Scott had now fallen into the swing of things, like yarding through and standing in slings. I climbed past him up a hand crack until it widened and leaned before it overhung. I stuck poorly in the fissure and as departure became imminent, I crammed in a Big Dude, hardware sling, shoulder and all. Scott followed, still shivering from a frigid belay. Time ran out as an icy blast caught

COLOR PLATE 6

Photo by Jay Smith

**“Wild, Wild West” Route on the
CENTRAL TOWER OF PAINE.**



us, nine pitches up and exposed to the worst. A desperate struggle followed to secure the ropes as we retreated in the tempest's vile grasp.

Wave upon wave, savage storms surged out of the Pacific and tortured the region with an eleven-day lashing. Ceaseless rain flooded our valley as the river swelled to demented proportions. Helpless, we feared for our ropes and tent as the Tower was blasted and became rime-coated.

Several weeks later, a brief lull let us discover that our tent had been avalanched away. With it had gone most of our equipment and much of our hope. Through binoculars, I could see our ropes violently thrashing as they whipped against the face, shredded and frayed.

Christmas passed without celebration. New Years followed in a state of despair. Time and again we attempted to gain the Tower only to be mercilessly thwarted well short of the base.

January 7, 1990

Greg had departed on January 3, leaving us exiled to our own miserable fate. But since then, the barometer had steadily risen and after 23 days of rain and frustration, hope again oozed from somewhere. For the fourth consecutive morning, I crawled out of the tent for the two A.M. weather check. This time it revealed an almost forgotten, deafening silence. With the sky still cloaked in black clouds, Scott reluctantly followed and we sped up the trail for one last all-out attempt.

Stout but brief gusts continued to plague us, but with the light of dawn, they ceased and the clouds disappeared. As altitude was gained, we could view the great icecap and a crystal horizon not seen before. This was the break I had waited two years to experience and we charged up the mountain as fast as we could. Struggling under bivy-laden packs, we ascended the ropes to realize our worst fear. The fixed rope above no longer existed. I called to Scott to scavenge some from below. I re-led the pitch with static cords and a skeletal rack and then rappelled back to Scott to retrieve my load. Having lost a precious hour, we continued, up past frays that cut halfway through the ropes, but eventually we arrived at the ledge at their end.

We cached our bivouac gear and Scott cast off toward the summit still some 1300 feet above. As he frantically aided up the most questionable section of the route, he forgot to clip in as he climbed. He then dropped a Friend (the first ever he claimed) and I bobbled the catch before it floated away. We were both really hyped and it was beginning to show as it was now or never with all the cards having been dealt. He stopped at a roof and hesitated for several minutes. Above him was a blankness.

"You might be able to hook and head this bit, but above that you're bolting for sure," he said.

"I might?" I questioned.

"Well, you can probably aid it faster."

PLATE 24

Photo by Scott Cosgrove

**Jay Smith leading Pitch 9 (5.10+) on
Central Tower of Paine.**



Neither of us was too thrilled at the prospect of drilling. We hadn't placed a bolt yet and it would probably take up the rest of the damned day if we had to start now. But I had the feeling that there lay a crack to the right. Snail-eyed, we swapped ends and I bat-manned back up. A sling toss to a knob led to a birdbeak and then a blade. The next crack started razor-thin but then widened. The crucial link had been made.

The weather was flawless. Not a breath of wind or wisp of cloud. I always knew you could be the best mountaineer in the world, if you had a crystal ball to tell you where and when there was going to be good weather.

Scott took command of the pitch above as I observed a feathery spectacle of ice littering the sky. The sun was melting the Tower's icy crown and water cascaded down into Scott's path. He merely pulled up his hood and continued as it flowed down his sleeves and filled his boots.

Four difficult pitches followed, depositing us on what should have been easy ground. But it lay beneath a deep frosting and was tricky to climb in rock shoes. We climbed simultaneously as we raced the sun. A mere 100 feet shy of the summit, the final vertical block was coated with a meter of rime. I foolishly edged right upon its scaly surface till it crumbled and peeled, leaving me hanging by one gloved hand. With a single nut somewhere between us, terror assisted me to regain purchase with adrenaline surging in my veins. I now traversed left, our last option, eventually to find the way on the less plastered north face.

The setting sun shone brightly on two smiling faces as we had nearly completed our wildest dream. But a nightmare descent still warranted caution and the party ended as we prepared to rappel into the dark.

At four A.M., we sat, joking and laughing, comfortably bivied on the wall's only ledge. The nine rappels hadn't gone without mishap, but now we felt assured of an easy descent. After 25 hours of continuous travel, we dozed off as a yellow moon sank behind a black veil.

In less than two hours I awoke to Scott's prodding as gusty winds forecast a warning of what was sure to come. The band of clouds that had lain over the icecap now charged the Towers like a raging bull. We were packed within minutes and smoking down the ropes as the Devil's own temper would tolerate us no more. Three hours later, soaked to the bone and thoroughly thrashed, we returned to camp as the weather returned to normal.

Summary of Statistics:

AREA: Torres del Paine, Patagonia, Chile.

NEW ROUTE: Central Tower of Paine, 2460 meters, 8071 feet, via the Northwest Arête, "Wild, Wild West" Route, November 17, 1989 to January 12, 1990. 40 hours of climbing over a period of 58 days. Summit reached on January 7, 1990 (Scott Cosgrove, Jay Smith).