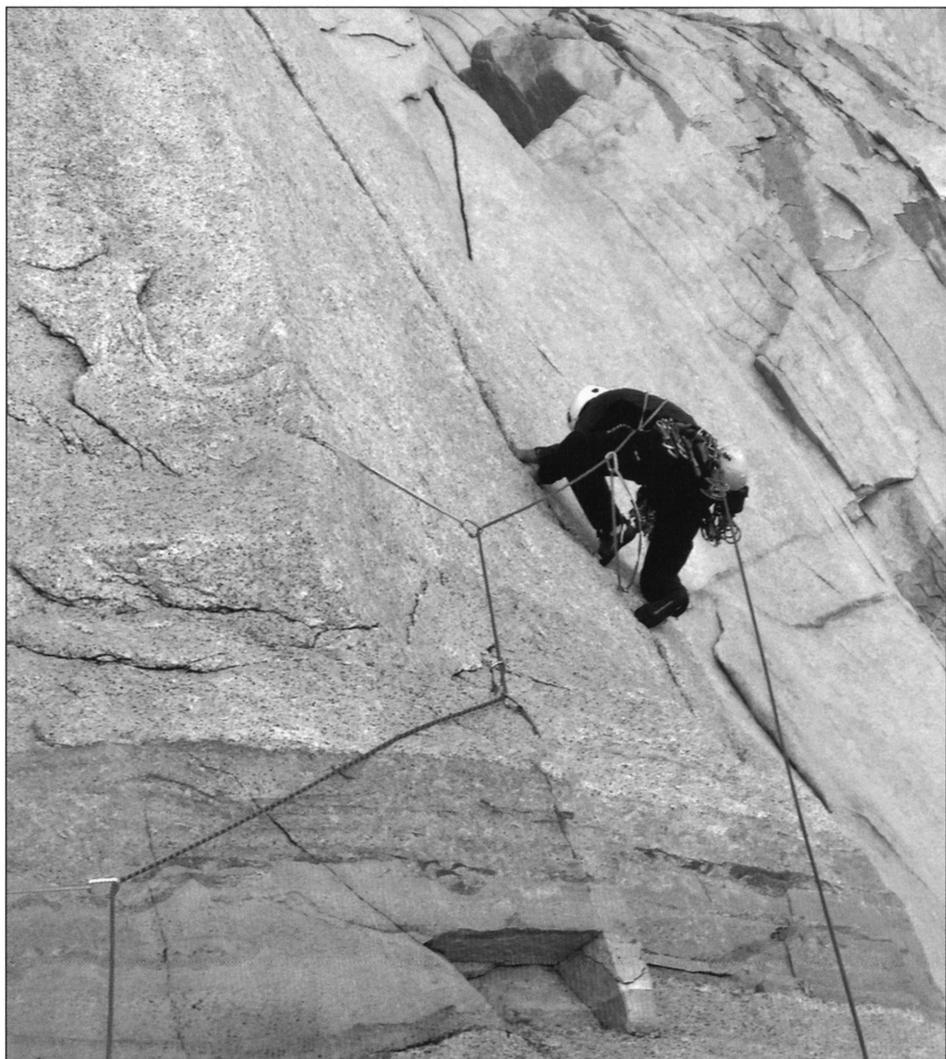


A LETTER HOME

The first free ascent of Linea di Eleganza, Fitz Roy.

TOPHER DONAHUE



Topher Donahue zigzags on the first day. *Tommy Caldwell*

February 23, 2006

Dear Daddy,

A few days ago, when I scattered a few of your ashes at the base of Fitz Roy, I had no idea we'd be going up for another try. Now we're standing on top after the most outrageous climb of my life. Had I known, I would have scattered you from here. But I guess the way the winds are in Patagonia, you probably beat us here.

It's about 4 p.m. and we've been going almost nonstop for 36 hours. Clouds are rolling over Cerro Torre, and the winds are growing stronger every minute. It's time to get out of here, but I want to linger a moment and share some thoughts with you about the climb we just completed.

I wish you and I had tried to climb Fitz Roy a couple of years earlier. Then I might have stood here with you, rather than with your memory and a few of your ashes on the breeze. Since I couldn't try it with you, I chose to come here with the only climber in the world who knows our family and is also capable of doing the climbs on the east face of this amazing peak: Tommy Caldwell. Earlier on this trip, we had a couple of great adventures trying a famous climb right up the center of the face that a team of Germans decorated with a couple hundred bolts. It is called the Royal Flush, but with its soaking-wet corners the Toilet Flush would have been an equally fitting name. It's ironic that the first-ascent team bolted it for the masses, like a crag in the Alps, but then the Torre gods pour water or ice across the bolts some 364 days a year.

We got tired of the flush factor, so when the last storm broke we decided to check out a drier and slightly longer climb on the same face called Linea di Eleganza. Until today, it had been climbed only once, by an Italian/Argentinean team. They fixed many ropes and spent multiple seasons to reach the summit. Their vision for the line was fantastic, but their house-keeping skills were not. They had a once in a lifetime climbing experience, but then left fixed ropes and equipment strewn across the lower portion of the climb and a couple of haul bags full of trash at their high camp.

For some reason we thought it would be fun to leave all our bivouac gear behind and just climb nonstop for as long as we could go. We invited Erik Roed to join us. At the bottom of the face we were able to step right off the flat glacier onto quality rock. The sun was shining, and we were all having a great time. To go as fast as possible but still experience the peak as a free climb, the leader climbed free and the two seconds quickly ascended the rope.

The rock was excellent, and the pitches went quickly. Awesome cracks and corners appeared, with some exhilarating face climbing in between. To begin with, Tommy and I took the leads and Erik carried the lion's share of the weight. Erik is a good climber, but Tommy and I have much more experience with routefinding during first ascents. For a while, the two climbers at the belay would giggle and make jokes while the leader solved the problems of onsight free climbing. Eventually the sun sank low, the climbing got a lot harder, and everything changed. It was my lead, and I started up an overhanging thin crack on an exposed arête. I began by chimneying behind a 40-foot dagger of rock until I could stand on the very point. From there I jammed a slightly wet crack and cranked on sloping face holds until my strength gave out and I blew a sequence, taking an exciting fall about 1,500 feet above the glacier.

While lowering to the belay, I thought about my chances of quickly dispatching this fierce lead, and then decided to let Tommy have a go. After pulling the rope, Tommy sent it first

try. Watching the best granite climber I've ever seen contrive rests with double heel hooks and strain through powerful laybacks while slamming in gear from strenuous positions confirmed my choice to give up the lead.

A few hours later it was dark, no one was having much fun, and I was leading again in the middle of the most demanding five hours I have spent tied into a rope. Lack of gear forced me to traverse out of the original aid line and link up a series of flakes that offered minimal protection and slow climbing. Alone in my little world in the glow of my headlamp, I slowly moved up the wall. Enduring a cold belay, my partners managed to yell happy words of encouragement when I finally clipped into a complicated anchor of five small nuts.

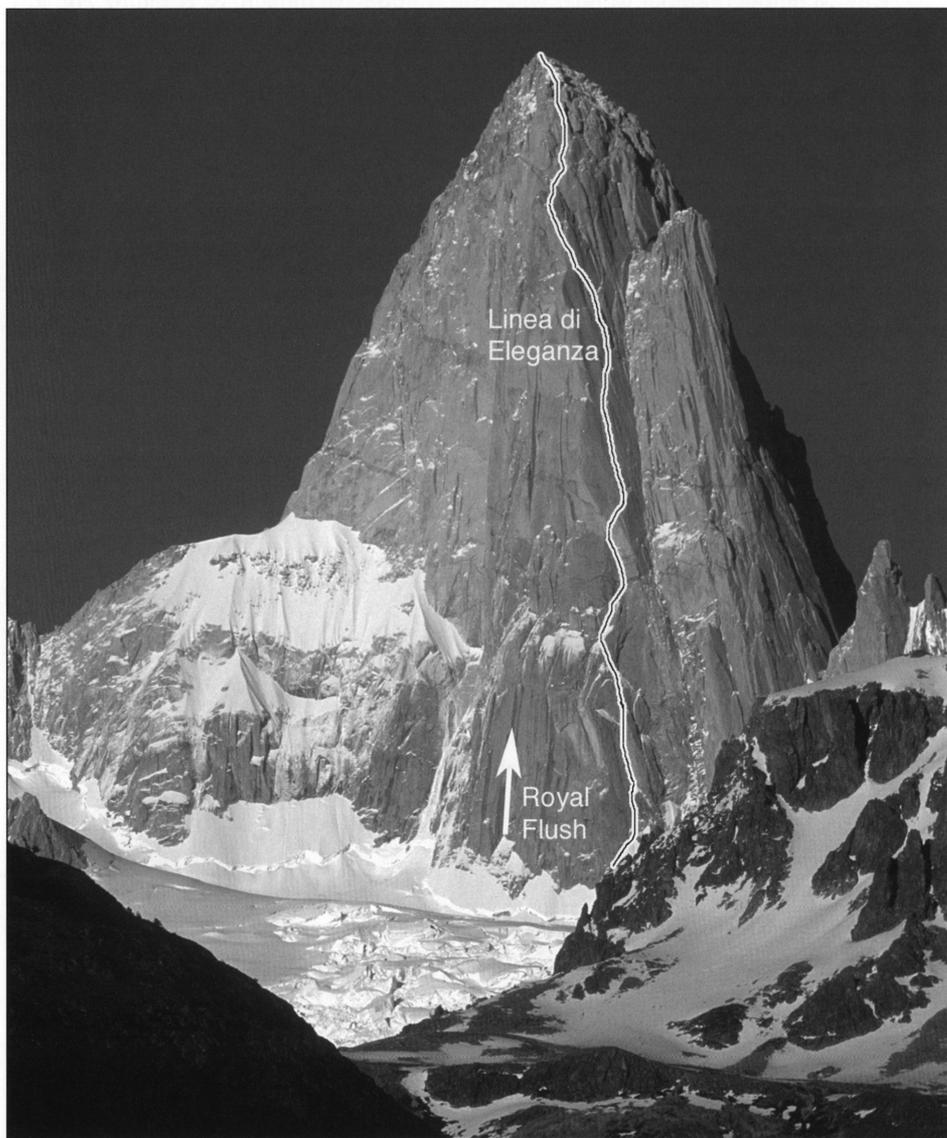
From the belay I peered into the darkness as far as my light would shine. Ice dripped menacingly from the steep corner above. I hoped to stem around this, but after climbing a few body lengths it became apparent I would need to climb the ice as well. I pulled up an ice tool and began to get creative. Chalking with one hand and gasting a series of flakes, I swung my tool into the thinly iced corner. Without years of experience of old-fashioned mixed climbing on granite, I never could have climbed the pitch. If I hadn't grown up guided by your view of the climbing world, Daddy, and how you saw bad conditions as a new season and new challenge, I simply would have declared the pitch out of condition. Instead, I stemmed around paper-thin smears of ice, switching the tool from hand to hand. Sometimes I would use it to clear rotten ice from the crack to make room for a jam or a cam. I kept free climbing, but the exertion became nauseating. I thought about retreating for boots and crampons, but the rock was too smooth; I often holstered the tool or left it behind for a few moves of insecure granite smearing.

While I was warm and gripped, Erik and Tommy were cold and gripped. I was bombing them with small pieces of ice, and I could hear their boots beating rhythmically against the rock to warm their toes. Nausea from exertion and the massive pump were forcing me to dangle frequently in the wrist leash of my single tool to regain strength, but since I was still free climbing I knew my partners would want me to take whatever time I needed. Finally I reached dry rock at a strenuous, thin hand and finger crack. Sixty feet later, with no gear, no energy, and no hangs, I fixed the ropes and collapsed onto the belay.

One pitch later, Tommy took over the lead, jamming efficiently up a steep crack into the blackness. Erik belayed while I passed out in my harness. Daddy, I have to wonder, did you have any idea all those years ago, when your 5-year-old son would take your climbing equipment and lead circles around your cabin floor, that one day he would be half a mile off a glacier, delirious from fatigue, without bivy gear, at the southern tip of the Americas? Was it more terrifying or exhilarating to watch me gain enough climbing experience to get into such a spectacular and ridiculous position? I wish I could ask you.

Erik and I slowly ascended the ropes to Tommy's anchor. Erik fell asleep, hanging in his harness with his head jammed in an offwidth, his headlamp shining strangely around his still figure. Our only information about the climb was a photo with a line drawing that I had pulled off the Web. We somehow lost that before even touching the rock, so now we were going by feel and the fixed anchors from the first ascent. Tommy ran into blankness 20 feet above the belay. A series of holds ran right, and Tommy tension traversed below us around the corner to see if the next system held promise. It didn't. As he tried to make his way back to our belay, his feet skittered and he came soaring past Erik and me, the rope slapping us, back and forth, until his momentum ceased.

Retreat, or at least some recovery, was mandatory. We rappled to a rounded ledge to rest for the last hour until dawn. For a few minutes we all fell asleep in our harnesses, leaning against each other like three drunks on the back of a motorcycle. Minutes later, we awoke shivering and fired up our stove to melt snow and greet the sunrise with a hot drink. When the sun hit the face and we turned to pull our ropes from our rappel, we all laughed. The ropes hung across the steepest part of the face. In daylight we never would have gone off-route the way we did.



Linea di Eleganza is the first free route up Fitz Roy's east face. The free ascent involved two 5.12 pitches, one pitch rated 5.12 M8, and numerous 5.10 and 5.11 pitches. *Rolando Garibotti*

We headed right on much easier terrain and began a dash for the summit. Clouds rolled across the ice cap, and the wind was increasing. We were a long way from the summit and the descent of the Franco-Argentinean Route on the other side of the mountain. We measured our progress against the massive north pillar; it was slower than we wanted, but we toiled onward. Ice appeared in all the cracks just as the angle of the wall broke. I led a wacky double offwidth choked with beautiful blue ice before handing the lead to Erik for the anchor leg. A few pitches later, Erik tied off a huge boulder on the summit and Tommy and I jugged happily.

Now, standing on top, I wonder what you would have thought of climbing Fitz Roy. I know you would have loved the uncertainty of the weather and the psychology of trying against all odds. You always wished the world had a mountain so big and so difficult that no one could reach its summit. Climbers would merely try hard and go as far as possible with no hope of actually making it to the top. Climbing in Patagonia is a little like that. To succeed on the first free ascent of this face, we had to forget the summit and immerse ourselves in the process. We had to leave behind anything that did not directly fuel our ascent. We forgot about success, and by doing so we succeeded.

Our climb is far from over. We will watch our third sunrise before we reach our tents and the other comforts of base camp. I wish I could have shared this lofty peak with you, but I guess in some ways I did. I am thankful for all the peaks we did share, and certainly without you I never would have been here.

*Your son,
Topher*

SUMMARY:

AREA: Fitz Roy, Patagonia

ASCENT: Alpine-style first free ascent of the east face of Fitz Roy, via the second ascent of Linea di Eleganza (1,250m, 33 pitches, VI 5.12+ M8, Codo-Fava-Orlandi, 2004); Tommy Caldwell, Topher Donahue, and Erik Roed, February 22-24, 2006. Free attempts on Royal Flush (ED+ 5.12b A1, Albert-Arnold-Gerschel-Richter, 1995) to 23rd pitch, Tommy Caldwell and Topher Donahue; Caldwell led crux pitch 19 free at “probably around 5.12c if dry, but since there was not an inch of dry rock on the pitch it felt more like 5.13 to me.”

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Topher Donahue, 34, lives in Nederland, Colorado, and works as a writer and photographer. He learned to climb as a child in nearby Rocky Mountain National Park, which he considers the best training ground in North America for high-standard rock climbing in alpine regions. His father, Mike Donahue, was the longtime owner of Colorado Mountain School, the guide service in the park. Mike died on November 16, 2005, at the age of 59.



Caldwell (top) and Donahue greet the day. *Topher Donahue*