

The Whitney Cirque: east faces of Third, Day, and Keeler needles and Mt. Whitney. *Renan Ozturk*

*Day Needle, new variation and Whitney Cirque linkup.* In late July Jake “The Snake” Whitaker and I climbed a new direct free variation to the East Face of Day Needle in the Mt. Whitney cirque. Prior to our climb I had already learned about Jake’s horrendous epic on his initial onsight solo attempt of this line. He and his free-soloing companion had collaborated in their gusto, only to get trapped in a formidable alcove a third of the way up. After yelling for a rescue produced only useless helicopters, Jake committed to the insecure downclimb to rescue his petrified partner.

Under this suspicious pretext I agree to climb with Jake for the first time and take part in his emotional cleansing. This time, however, I was happy we could use a 100' 9mm rope, some wires, and a set of Camalots, to #3. Above the previous high point I encountered a burly 5.10 off-fists crack, which I protected by placing RPs in a seam behind my back as Jake simuled below me. Above, Jake onsighted the crux, a brilliant 5.11 overhanging hand-and-finger crack on a golden headwall, close to the 14,000' summit, thereby completing his catharsis.

A week later Jake and I returned to the Whitney Cirque and completed a one-day free linkup of some major faces that form the iconic California skyline. With our 100' piece of cord we first repeated our Day Needle free variation (V 5.11), then downclimbed the classic East Face (III 5.7) of Mt. Whitney, looped back into Keeler Needle’s Harding Route (V 5.10c, onsight for me), then glissaded a snowfield and onsighted the Western Front (IV 5.10c) on Mt. Russell. During our scramble off Russell, we watched a huge lenticular of fire smoke overcome the highest point in the contiguous U.S. As the setting sun descended through this anomaly, it cast a rare neon red, day’s-end alpenglow, capping our adventure.

RENAN OZTURK, AAC

*Keeler Needle, The Strassman Route.* Yup. Eight days. Constant work, no rests. And that’s why I ran out of food and water. Not to mention that this was completely unknown terrain. I am not 20 years old anymore.

What would motivate a 46 year-old guy to solo a new route on a remote backcountry wall, when he knows what’s involved? As any woman knows, four things motivate men: money, sex, food, and ego. I would be deprived of the first three on the list, so it must be that seventh

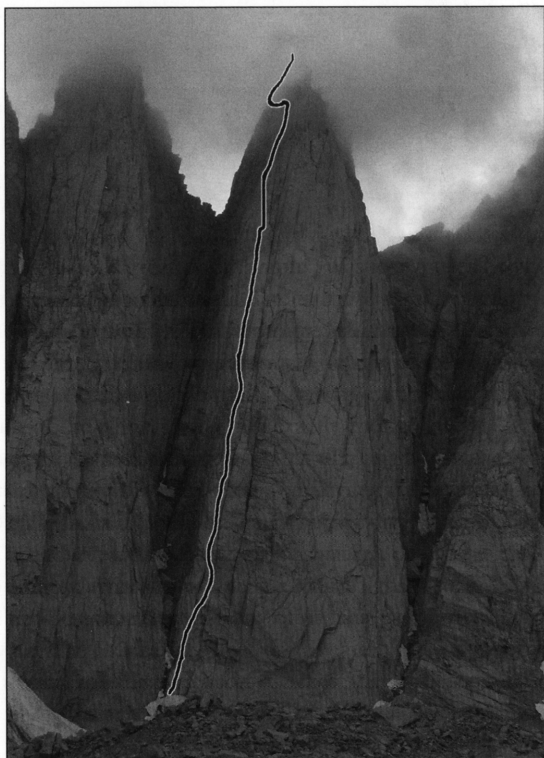
deadly sin of pride. And there's more—a race, a friendly 20-year competition to see who would be the first to climb all nine east faces of the Whitney Crest. I won and became President of the East Face Club. Five of those climbs were by first ascents. If I could now do a first ascent on each face, I would become Lord Overseer of the East Face Club.

So in September I hiked in to the east face of Keeler Needle with a light pack and food for three days that could be stretched to six. I'd left gear and ropes fixed from an earlier solo attempt that floundered after two pitches. I planned to reach my high point in a single day. But I was terribly out of shape, and the altitude didn't help. By the time I reached the snowfield at Keeler's base it was well past dark and well past my bedtime. With my only sleeping bag on the wall, I had to keep moving. The snowfield was frozen solid, and I had no ice axe or crampons. I inched upward through the night, arriving at the base with near frostbitten fingers, as the first light of dawn bathed me in warmth.

After a brief nap, I reached my high point and immediately ran into an overhang, followed by a perfect little ledge and another overhang. This one looked malicious, so I found the finger ledge of contentment that allowed me to traverse right into another crack system. It looked like it might end on a bivy ledge. I threw myself at the continuously wide crack, climbing high above my last piece, only to realize that what looked like a ledge above wasn't a ledge at all. Dejected, I descended back to the ledge where I started.

The next morning I moved back into the original crack and found an exquisite hand crack in superb granite. I also found pitons and slings from climbers who had gone the wrong way on the Harding Route or were descending it. Afternoon thunder, rain, and hail spurred me upward to a magnificent ledge and the promise of low-angle scrambling. But more haul-bag hassles ate up my time. The scrambling would have to wait until tomorrow.

I could see a beautiful corner with perfect double hand-jam crack leading to the massive ledge that juts out in the middle of Keeler Needle. From the ledge easy ramps led to a slightly-less-than-vertical wall of fins. As I descended back to the big ledge, I looked up and wondered how I would fare tomorrow on a horror show that I dubbed the "Miserable Pitch." A spectacular sunset treated me. My position on the ledge had me in the exact center of a giant half-sphere formed by Whitney and the



The Strassman Route on Keeler Needle. Several other routes climb this face. *Michael Strassman*

Whitney Needles. It was as if I was looking out from the inside of a crystal ball. This is why we climb in the mountains.

The next day, I attacked the Miserable Pitch. The rock quality changed to scaly loose flakes and flaring, hard-to-protect seams. I had been going on half rations and the food was nearly gone. I had maybe one swig of water left. During the entire climb I had a mental jukebox playing songs in my head. But now the jukebox had stopped. I was starting to lose it. Fatigued and confused I kept messing up simple yet essential tasks. Then I looked up at the next pitch: downward-pointing loose flakes on a deteriorating overhanging wall.

I wanted to tell someone of my predicament. What would I say? I certainly didn't want a rescue. I knew I could make it to the top. I dialed my friend Alice. "Hi this is Mike. I have no food or water. I probably will not summit until Saturday. Maybe you can convince Timmy to hike in and help carry out the gear." She cut me off. "I'm not going to be responsible for convincing him." The cell phone died.

Four days climbing Keeler Needle alone, and I was out of food and water. With much effort, and to avoid the demonic face above me, I spent the rest of the afternoon getting to a ledge that I remembered from the Harding Route. But when I finally got the haul bag and myself over to it, it wasn't the ledge at all. On this ledge I slept with my feet dangling and the continuous feeling that I would roll off the ledge into the black night.

Come morning, I got moving early. My attitude had changed. Goddamn it, I said to myself, I am going to attack that crack. It turned out to be far tamer than it looked. Above, I climbed a long continuous corner right on the edge of the south and east faces. I climbed past sunset, past exhaustion.

The next morning became the next afternoon, and I didn't feel up for climbing. But I was very close to the ledges that might get me out early. I started climbing. The next part was easy and enjoyable. I reached the ledges, but lack of food and water was playing tricks on me. I heard voices. It turned out to be hikers on Day Needle. I called out, "I've had no food or water for two days. Do you think you could help me?"

I had reached the end of my rope. The ledge system was a longer than I thought. I untied and free soloed. A thousand feet later I was on the talus field of Keeler's west slope. I ran down to the trail as the sun balanced on the horizon. There was a quart of water, some energy bars and salami and cheese. I burst into tears. I arrived back just as true darkness fell over the Whitney Needles and began hauling the bag to my sleeping spot. Of course it got stuck.

In the morning I packed the bag for a big impact: 2,000' to the snowfields below. Then I climbed to the top and yelled to people on the trail that I needed more food and water. I used a hiker's cell phone to stop any rescue attempts, and a ranger I met on the trail made an official call, but the helicopter still came. I was afraid it would land on Mt. Whitney and hand me a bill.

When the hikers heard my story, I became a bit of a celebrity. Beautiful women offered me their gorp and others wanted to know the answer to that one question: how do you go to the bathroom? Someone offered to carry my climbing gear down, and suddenly I was alone again. I staggered down the trail and back to town with a beard, burnt lips, sore muscles, hands that wouldn't close, and numb fingertips. A friend asked, "Did you learn anything?"

I learned that I could do it.