

65 *The Nose of El Capitan, showing route and Camps* This and next photo: Glen Denny

# Vertical desert: the Nose of El Capitan

Michael Burke

In the last month I had tried El Capitan with a number of different climbers. Now I had Rob Woods as my companion. This time we hoped to reach the summit.

There were fixed ropes for the first seven rope-lengths, belonging to a team of climbers who were hoping to make a film on the face. As I had done this section twice already we decided to use them. We would go up to Sickle Ledge, spend the night there, and then hope to make El Cap Towers the next night.

With fifty-five pitons, eighty karabiners and two gallons of water we started in the late evening up the first four ropes to Sickle Ledge.

We had a good night's sleep on the ledge and set off early next morning. We were soon up into the Stove Leg cracks and the end of the fixed ropes. I set off leading. The situation was very impressive. Rob belaying, sat in slings on the steep wall below. It was a good hand jamming crack so I was able to do most of the next pitch free. Rob followed using jumars, taking out the pitons as he came. Meanwhile I pulled up the hauling bag. The next pitch needed aid on a wide crack and I then had a lot of difficulty passing a large loose block. Rob was in a direct line under this and as I didn't like the idea of soloing the rest of the climb I was extra careful. Another hanging belay. I then set off, still in the same crack line and soon reached the top of the Stove Leg crack, and Dolt Tower, the first ledge since Sickle, now about 800 ft below. It was now three in the afternoon and we managed to do the next three pitches to El Cap Towers with little time to spare. Three memorable pitches, each with a perfect crack. Enough to make the scars on the back of a British climber's hands tingle with pleasure. In the last few minutes before dark I fixed a rope up the next pitch, a chimney behind a flake known as Texas Flake. It was about grade V and quite strenuous. I then rappelled down to the perfect bivouac site on top of El Cap Towers. What a bivi! Just lying on top of our sleeping bags. Quite a contrast to the Alps.

The next morning we overslept till nine. A bad blunder, as our enemy the sun was on the face now. Rob quickly went up the rope and belayed on the top of Texas Flake. I followed. The next pitch went across a steep wall and up another flake, Boot Flake. The first 50 ft were on expansion pitons and then up the crack on the right side of Boot Flake. There was a bad section at the end of the bolts where one was missing. We managed to pass this by using a rurl. From there it was straightforward artificial, at least it seemed so. I had a piton pull out and fell 40 ft, pulling out four others.

Then followed a double pendulum leftwards known as 'the King Swing.' Rob lowered me down about 60 ft. I was then able to run backwards and forwards

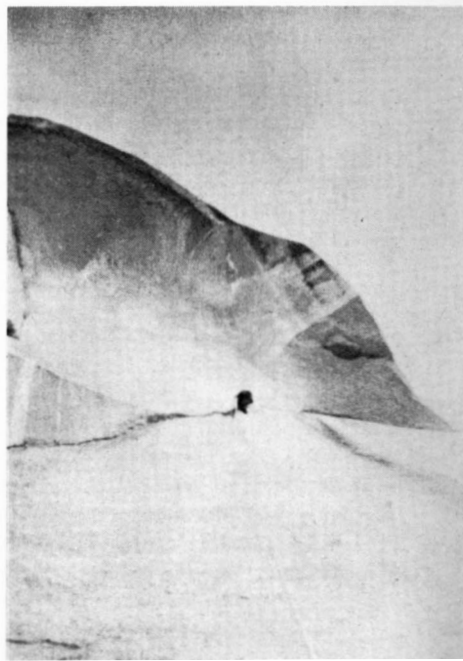
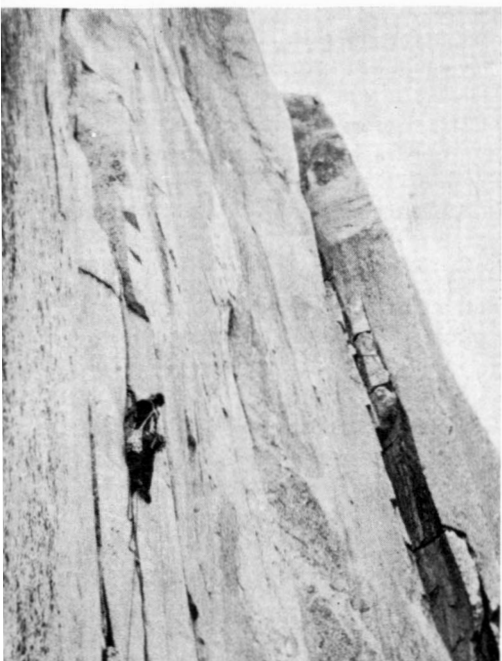


66 *Pendulum to Stove Leg crack* The second pendulum after Camp 1

67 *Mick Burke between Dolt Tower (Camp 2) and El Cap Tower (Camp 3); and approaching the Great Roof, above Camp 4* Both photos: Rob Woods

across the wall, picking up speed until at last I was able to reach a piton already in place about 40 ft away. From there Rob lowered me again and I was once again able to run. At last I made it to the first crack in the Grey Bands. From there the crack led upwards for 40 ft to a tiny stance. Rob sent the hauling sack across with the water in it and then rigged a rappel to follow.

We continued up through the Grey Bands. The climbing was nowhere excessively hard but one had to think all the time. Putting in and taking out pitons consumed a lot of time and Rob had to work like the proverbial Trojan recovering them. A lot had to be tied off, but most were good. Another, but smaller, pendulum took us to a traverse line, which in turn led to our ledge for the night. Camp 4. We were now low on water. We had about a pint left and it did very little to quench our thirst. The temperature had been in the nineties during the day and really a little too hot for running about on the big pendulum. However, we hoped to find a gallon of water at Camp 5 which the previous party had left. Despite our thirst we both slept well and were in good spirits, if only from the fact that the only way out now was upwards. It would be impossible to reverse the pendulums we had done that day.



Next morning our main problem was the Great Roof, a gigantic overhang which barred the way into the upper dihedrals. It turned out to be quite straightforward. The pitons went in well and there was a ledge of sorts to belay at on the far side. Another straightforward pitch led to a series of deep grooves. It was strenuous working in the grooves because of the difficulty of placing the pitons right in their back. Eventually I was able to start climbing free—very strenuous—and that way reached Camp 5, but to find no water! That meant we would have no water today, none for the bivouac and none tomorrow. Thirsty days ahead. Rob didn't seem too happy when I told him the news. I pulled the bag up. It was quite light now, just our sleeping gear, a bit of food and some of the pitons. Rob started up taking out the pegs. I could see a higher ledge about 20 ft away so I decided to have a look. There it was. Amazing that a one-gallon polythene water-bottle can change the whole world. At least for us. Yosemite once again took on its normal beauty.

After Camp 5 we had to climb fast to do the three pitches to Camp 6 before darkness. I just arrived with dusk and Rob had to follow the last pitch in the dark. We were now very happy. Unless something untoward happened this would be our last night on the face.

The next day dawned as beautiful as we had come to expect. We set off at high speed. One tremendous pitch led after another. Everything was below us now. Rob was always in view. Always further in than the last time. The trees 3000 ft below were like decorations for a cake. We could hear people shouting down by the river. Occasionally we could see splashes as someone dived in. Another world. Tomorrow we would be part of that world, only memories left to remind us. We were still in the world of our own making. One pitch stays in my mind quite clearly though. After climbing a small roof, an absolutely vertical wall led upwards for about 50 ft. A perfect crack for one's hands and perfect little footholds.

We were now racing for the top. The climbing in the main was free with just occasional pegs for aid on the last three pitches prior to the final roofs. They seemed to go quite fast.

A strange penultimate pitch. A traverse across the wall of the groove to a ledge out on the edge of nothing. There were the bolts of the final pitch. First, however, 30 ft of artificial. A perfect crack though. Everything seemed easy now. Every peg placed from the top rung of my *étriers*. Below the final overhang I belayed whilst Rob came up as far as the start of the bolts. We should be able to make it to the top in one rope-length. Rob came up the rope. Swinging free

now. For a person who previous to this route had never done a climb lasting longer than one day, he didn't seem too bothered on this, his fifth.

As I climbed over the last overhangs my mind went back ten years to Warren Harding on the first ascent of this climb. After efforts over the course of two years he had arrived at the start of the last pitch in the late evening and realised he would have to use bolts to get over the final overhangs. Instead of having a bivouac and starting the next morning he just carried on through the night, arriving on the summit with the dawn. He had certainly earned his jug of wine. At last not the dawn light but the evening light showed up a tree and then it was all over. I belayed and shouted for Rob to follow.

Just as he arrived so did our friends who had come to the summit to welcome us. Cans of Budweiser all round. How nice not to have to scurry off the mountain before the storm. No storms here. At least not tonight. So nice just to finish a climb. Pull over the top and be handed a beer by one's friends. How pleasant to just sit there and let one's mind flash back over the last few days. A new dimension in climbing with the gigantic pendulums across steep blank walls. The superb granite cracks just fist and toe width. That beautiful bivouac site on top of El Cap Towers. The frightening exhilaration of a 40-ft free fall. The positions above the Great Roof. Those enjoyable free pitches just before the top. The final bolt ladder easy as it is now, still has 3400 ft of fresh air below to keep it in its perspective and, finally, the fun of climbing with Rob. It would have been a difficult task to find someone who would have more enhanced those five days in the Vertical Desert.

SUMMARY—California, Yosemite Valley. Nose of El Capitan. First British ascent. 26–30 June 1968. M. Burke, R. Woods.