



AAC Publications

Fifi Buttress, Final Frontier: First Free Ascent

California, Yosemite National Park

A friend texted me about the El Cap bird-nesting closures while Nik Berry and I were on the Dihedral Wall, aiding the first four pitches. "Turns out we're in a closed area," I said. Nik responded, "Really! I'll make a peregrine omelet." Seven hundred feet of immaculate corners taunted us with good rock and amazing movement. We bailed, disheartened. "Where are we going to climb now?" Nik said.

El Capitan draws most climbers' eyes. The monolith overshadows the other formations in Yosemite, and the enormity of the rock allows for hundreds of routes. Unfortunately, piecing together an all-free line on the beast is challenging. To a large degree, El Capitan feels tapped out for hard new free climbs.

Yosemite's walls have always provided adventure. But increasingly over the past few years, climbers have looked beyond El Capitan, establishing new testpieces throughout the valley. These routes feel harder, more sustained, and cleaner. In 2012, Mikey Schaefer struck with a new route up the steep buttress of Middle Cathedral, Father Time [AAJ 2013], a route longer and harder than some El Cap routes. Lucho Rivera freed the aid line Romulan Warbird on Fifi Buttress [AAJ 2013]. A year later Lucho hiked up to Liberty Cap, climbing its first free route, Mahtah, with Cedar Wright [AAJ 2014]. Later in the season, Luke Stefurak and Ben Steel added Liberty Cap's second free route, Scarface [AAJ 2014]. On Mt. Watkins, Jake Whittaker and Sean Leary have both been working on new free routes. And Alex Honnold has given attention to a Todd Skinner project on Leaning Tower [AAJ 2013].

While climbing on Romulan Freebird [AAJ 2013] on Fifi Buttress with Lucho Rivera, I noticed another aid line on the wall: Final Frontier (V 5.7 C3, Black-Griffith-McDevitt-McDevitt, 1999), which follows a series of steep, thin cracks. A local aid climber had fixed ropes through the steepest part of the 900' buttress, and I jumared the route to inspect it for the possibility of free climbing. "It's going to be hard," I thought.

Final Frontier appeared attainable with a psyched, strong partner: Nik Berry. So, in early Spring, Nik and I jumared up, brushed the thin cracks, and swung around on the steep face to find the crimps that would link larger features. Though the aid route had seen only a handful of aid ascents, fixed gear still covered the rock. I decided to buff the route, yarding out the heads, pins, and fixed mank. I replaced the bad gear with bolts: Dan McDevitt wanted the route to see traffic and approved of the bolts, and I wanted other climbers to try the line. On route, the rock was immaculate, the climbing was steep and sustained, and the hike from the Bridalveil parking lot consumed a mere 24 minutes. Half of climbing on El Capitan is time-consuming, blue-collar work: hauling bags, jumaring, and toiling on the wall; Fifi Buttress offered a quiet location and more climbing than working.

Soon after inspecting the climb, Nik attempted a redpoint but fell off the 5.13b crux, the California Girls Corner. I attempted the pitch but ripped off a chunk of rock and gouged my arm. We headed down and rested. A few days later, in late April, Nik redpointed up to the corner and fell again. This time, he pulled the rope and then sent the pitch next try. He fired the subsequent difficult pitch, another hard arching crack, then led to the summit. I had followed Nik on the route but fell on the harder pitches.

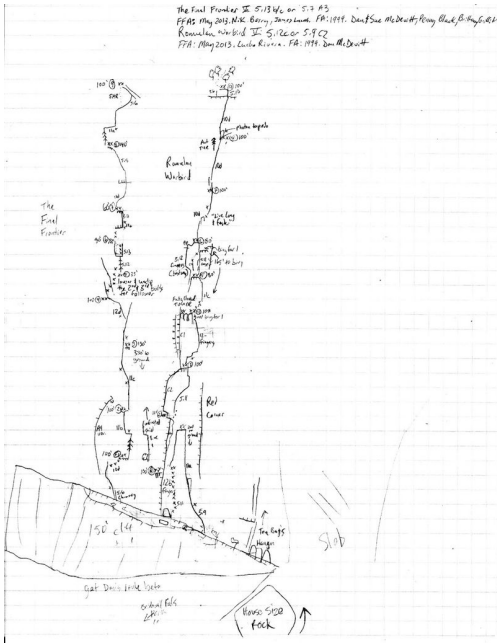
After Nik left the Valley, I returned to the route. I had figured out the difficult first corner, managed to piece together a 5.13 traverse, but had difficulty with a high-step move on an upper 5.12 corner and

the boulder problem on the California Girls Corner. In May, a month after Nik's ascent, I attempted to redpoint the route again: I fell dynoing to a hold on the California Girls Corner. I came down. I rested. I hiked in Tuolumne. I slept at 10,000'. I wanted to hit that hold, and I hoped sleeping at a higher altitude would help.

Katie Lambert joined me for my second redpoint attempt. I felt strong and dispatched the initial 5.12+ corner, then the 5.13 face traverse, but I fell on the California Girls Corner yet again. "You just have to let yourself do it," Katie said. My second try, the corner felt easier. I hit the end of the crux and climbed to the anchor. The next hard pitch went smoothly, and I fired the rest of the route. Katie climbed without falling, flashing the route on top-rope.

Final Frontier has now seen a number of attempts and been repeated four times. Father Time and Mah Tah have also been repeated. There's no doubt these routes are upping the standards of free climbing in Yosemite Valley.

Images



Topo for Romulan Warbird and Final Frontier.



James Lucas cranks down high on Final Frontier.



A photo topo of the Fifi Butress.

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