



AAC Publications

El Capitan, Passage to Freedom

California, Yosemite National Park

In October, Tommy Caldwell and I, along with help from Austin Siadak and Kevin Jorgeson, completed a new free route on El Cap. We followed the old Leo Houlding route Passage to Freedom (see AAJ 2000) up to El Cap Tower, and then pioneered an interesting traverse back right to finish on New Dawn. It was a line that Tommy had considered extensively while working on the Dawn Wall and had briefly inspected on rappel over previous seasons.

We knew the climbing would be fairly hard and would require some bolts on the otherwise unprotectable faces, so it made sense to come in from above and fix lines down the route. We were lucky to be climbing on a relatively unpopular aid line, so we didn't have to worry about ruining anyone's climbing experience by swinging around on static lines.

The upper corners of the route were the defining features that drew Tommy to the line to begin with. Clean, laser-cut thin-finger cracks run for hundreds of feet right through the Harding Roof, an imposingly large overhang a few hundred feet below the summit. As we began to work on them, we realized that in some ways they were the perfect difficulty—hard enough to be engaging, but not so hard that they would become a multi-year project like the neighboring Dawn Wall. As it turned out, the actual crux came on one of the final slabs above the corners, one pitch below the summit, a section of thin climbing that Tommy called “maybe one of the most unpleasant slabs I've ever climbed.”

Now we just had to find a way to free climb up to the corners. Almost 20 years ago, Leo Houlding had pioneered Passage to Freedom, an 11-pitch 5.13d that climbed up to El Cap Tower. Leo's line one quirk—he had bolted an Alfa Romeo hood ornament onto the wall as a handhold to bypass a blank section on a 5.13d slab pitch. But when Tommy started working on the slab, he realized it was easier for him to just climb straight up the original aid line and bypass the Alfa Romeo badge altogether. This required some extremely thin, offset laybacking/slab climbing, which also wound up in the 5.13c/d range.

That got us up to El Cap Tower, but the biggest question mark on the route remained: how to connect over to the Dawn Wall, about 100m to the east. Tommy had done a little exploratory rappelling over the years and promised that there was a big white dike that would make for easy traversing. He even joked that it would be the opposite of the crux Dawn Wall traverse: rightward on 5.10 jugs instead of leftward on 5.14c/d micro edges. We added some bolts to the face along the most probable-looking line, but we weren't able to really climb on the pitches because their traversing nature made it a bit too complicated for normal Micro Traxioning.

We all put about two and half weeks of preparation into the route between different personal obligations drawing us out of the Valley. Tommy found the climbing the easiest among us (apparently, working on the Dawn Wall for seven years really helped his granite technique), but none of us had actually redpointed any of the hard pitches or knew for sure that we could do the climb. With tight schedules for all of us, Kevin opted out of a push from the ground and Tommy and I settled on a three-day window before Halloween. Neither of us really felt ready, but it made sense to go up and try our best. Our only firm rule was that Tommy had to be down in time to trick-or-treat with his kids.

We set out on October 28 with bivy gear pre-stashed at El Cap Tower and Austin juggling our fixed

lines. He was taking photos and assisting with the hauling and general toil of big-wall life. The first crux, the 5.13+ that avoided the Alfa Romeo, took us each several tries. Two pitches higher, we were both briefly stopped by an 8' horizontal dyno on another 5.13 pitch, but again we managed with a few tries. We made it to El Cap Tower late that night and shared the ledge with a team of Nose climbers.

The next morning began with a big loop onto the Nose—down to the Jardine Traverse, back up to the Lynn Hill Traverse, and then breaking right onto what I dubbed the Tommy Traverse, the big adventure heading rightward, back to the Dawn Wall. When Tommy tried the first pitch of dike traversing, which he'd originally hoped would be 5.10, he discovered that it was about mid-5.13. We both worked it out and managed to squeak by, but it was a little unnerving that the parts we thought would be easy were winding up in the 5.13 range. I then led a 70m traverse over to the Dawn Wall, which was the other big question mark on the route. One of the bolts wound up being in the wrong place and I clipped into our static line hanging down from above in desperation to protect a few moves, but ultimately managed to free the pitch first try. When we returned to the route later to clean our ropes and gear, we added some bolts and an anchor to make this pitch reasonable for a ground-up ascent.

That got us to the 5.13d pitch leading to Wino Tower on the Dawn Wall, which marks the end of that route's hard climbing. Tommy managed to send it through the night, but I preferred to do my hard climbing in the morning, because even though the rock was hotter and conditions weren't quite as good, at least I could feel my fingers and see the holds.

From here we headed back left into the striking upper corners, spending another two days finishing the last nine pitches. We both took many falls and at times had to aid climb to work out gear placements. (We each top-roped the other person's leads.) It all culminated on the final 50m 5.13d slab pitch, only 40m below the summit of El Cap. It was getting late, and Tommy was supposed to be down to trick-or-treat with his kids by sunset. I fell in the middle of the pitch and wound up redpointing from a no-hands stance in the middle of the pitch rather than re-climb the whole thing. Tommy wound up doing the same when he top-roped the pitch. So when we finally summited (just in time to run down and see the family!), we both knew our style could be improved upon.

Hopefully, someone will do the route in a day with no falls at some point. As Tommy said, it's some of the best climbing on El Cap.

– Alex Honnold

Summary of Activity: First ascent of Passage to Freedom (3,000', 27 pitches, VI 5.13d) on El Capitan, October 28-31, 2019.

Images



Alex Honnold climbing a glorious 5.12b splitter on pitch 20 of Passage to Freedom.



Tommy Caldwell makes the wild finishing moves at El Cap's summit during the first ascent of Passage to Freedom.



Tommy Caldwell and Alex Honnold on top of El Cap after making the first ascent of Passage to Freedom.

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