



AAC Publications

Mike Corbett, 1953 – 2022

Mike “Mr. El Cap” Corbett’s contributions to Yosemite include big-wall first ascents, speed records, becoming the first person to climb El Capitan 50 times, and, perhaps most importantly, his time and hard work for friends and partners as they made history themselves. These include Mark Wellman, who in 1989 made the first ascent of El Capitan by a person with paraplegia when he and Corbett climbed the Shield. For that moment, world news shifted to Yosemite National Park, with cameras following their every move. Fifty reporters were on top when they got there.

Corbett and Wellman reunited in 1991 for Half Dome’s Tis-sa-ack route (22 pitches, VI 5.9 A3), and news of their ascent swept the nation again. In 1999, Corbett brought 81-year-old Gerry Bloch up El Capitan’s Aquarian Wall, topping their own record (set 13 years earlier) for the oldest person to climb El Cap.

Corbett was a soldier’s son—his father survived two tours in Vietnam. He moved around the country with his father, attending nine high schools before graduating in San Francisco. Immediately after high school, he moved to Yosemite and didn’t look back.

Writing about El Capitan’s climbing history, Daniel Duane describes Corbett as one of the most committed El Cap climbers in “the post-Bridwell era.” By 1984 he had climbed El Cap 24 times. He put up scary aid routes all over the Valley, including three rarely repeated routes on El Capitan: Squeeze Play (18 pitches, VI 5.9 A3), On the Waterfront (VI 5.9 A5), and Pacemaker (VI 5.9 A4). Other first ascents included Mt. Watkin’s Tenaya’s Terror (VI 5.9 A4), Washington Column’s Mideast Crisis (V 5.8 A2), the West Buttress of Liberty Cap (V 5.10 A3), Learning to Crawl (V 5.9 A3+) on Higher Cathedral Rock, and an unreported, unnamed route on Quarter Dome. He made a living working for Yosemite Search and Rescue in this era, raking in \$2,000 a year.

In 1986, Corbett, Steve Bosque, and John Middendorf attempted the south face of Half Dome, and a brutal winter storm rolled in, with 50mph winds and freezing rain. A helicopter came to the aid of the hypothermic climbers, an event eerily similar to Warren Harding and Galen Rowell’s rescue off the same route in 1970. “It came in close and started tipping back and forth,” recalls Bosque. “They lowered a rescuer, he swung in, and I grabbed him. They hauled Mike out first, as he was really hurting.”

No longer able to work on the SAR team, Corbett became a janitor at the Yosemite Medical Clinic to pay his medical bills. He didn’t give up climbing, however. By 1987, he had 41 ascents of El Cap to his name.

In 1991 Corbett joined forces with Ken Yager to give presentations celebrating climbing in the park. Calling their effort the Yosemite Climbing Archives, the two pooled their climbing gear and reached out to friends and families of other climbers for their collections, including the late John Salathé. This led to Yager’s Yosemite Climbing Association Museum in Mariposa, where Corbett volunteered until his final days.

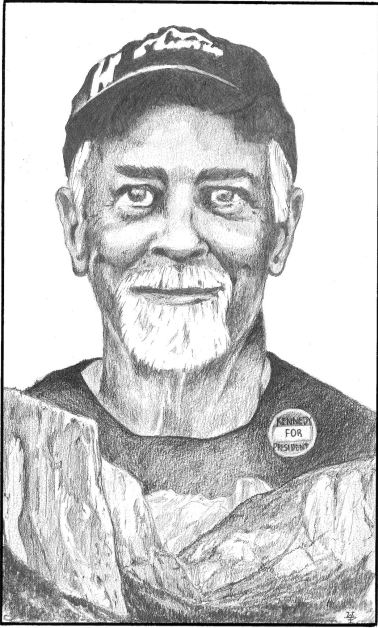
Corbett passed on May 7 at the age of 68. He is survived by his wife, Jennifer LaDuca, first wife, Nikyra Calcagno, daughter, Ellie Dominguez, and three grandchildren. “He just lived life with so much passion. He had a ton of interests,” Calcagno told the *Fresno Bee*. “He really had this brilliant mind,

this fascination with history, and this amazing capacity to recall historic facts and information.”

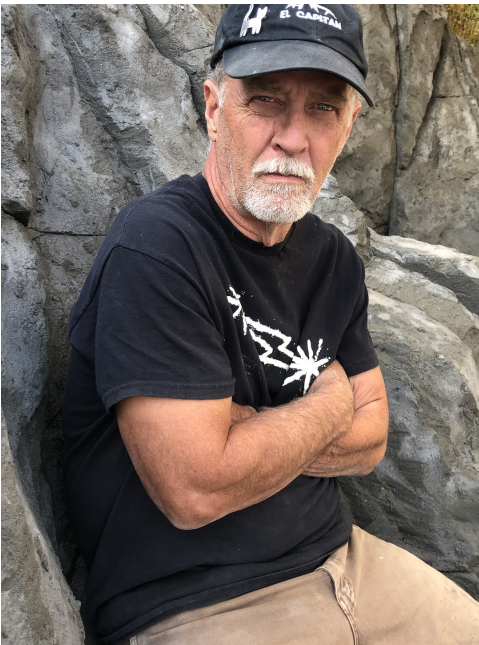
Bosque added, “He was a man of honor. He would not ignore a cry for help; he was kind, went out of his way to help people, and always tried to do the right thing. He was like a brother; I miss him.”

– **Chris Van Leuven**

Images



Drawing of Mike Corbett by Will Pollard.



Mike Corbett.

Article Details

Author	Chris Van Leuven
Publication	AAJ
Volume	65
Issue	97
Page	354
Copyright Date	2023
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions