

## Fourth Time Lucky

*by Andy Tomlinson*

The light was fading as I clamped up to the top of the tenth pitch; it was turning into a long day. Mike Ryan and I had started clamping to Sickle 12 hours earlier and it had been a steep learning curve for me all day. Aid-climbing had always been a mystery and here I was learning for real on The Nose with the best of teachers. This was my fourth attempt so I should have gained some skill but it appeared to have been precious little. My excuse was that I had only made it to Sickle before! Mike must have been regretting his rash suggestion that we team up – after all he had climbed it 30 years earlier so why repeat it! His misgivings must have been strengthened as he had watched my increasingly futile attempts to gain access to the Stovelegs crack via a long pendulum earlier in the day and then take ages to climb the pitch hidden from view. Fear had gripped me all the way up that pitch as I battled with self-inflicted rope drag, gut-wrenching exposure and an over active imagination on the consequences of a fall. The net result had been a tongue so dry that it and my palate became inseparable until much needed water finally arrived after further energy-sapping hauling of ‘The Pig’.



*Andy leading the bolt ladder off Texas Flake.*

*Photo Mike Ryan*

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I arrived at the small cave-like stance and tied on. Mike unclipped the gear from my harness whilst I forced calories and water down my throat. With his usual quiet efficiency the rack was rapidly sorted and passed back to me. ‘I’ve never climbed in the dark’ I whimpered. ‘Well this is as good a time as any to start’ came the blunt reply; the unwritten agreement was that we swapped leads and took whatever came our way. Conversation ceased and I set off in the gathering darkness. Three half-hearted and ponderous moves upwards left me attempting to maintain appearances whilst inwardly quivering with fear. Gear placed just in time, I took flight and landed unceremoniously back next to Mike! No words were exchanged but, mind now focused, I set off again with a determination I hadn’t previously experienced, but there again I was on the route of my dreams. Time passed and I became absorbed in the black art of aid-climbing by torch light. The parallel crack system meant that the same sized cams were required for move after move... after move. Two cams of each size on the rack focused my mind as long distances were climbed without protection in an attempt to preserve the dwindling number of correct sized cams. The flared nature of the crack meant that none of the placements felt secure; waves of fear gripped my mind again. Three hours and 150ft of climbing later I pulled onto the next belay ledge much to Mike’s relief too no doubt. The odd ‘are you there yet?’ had floated up the crag in the darkness as time drifted by. As



*Mike belaying on top of Texas Flake.*

*Photo Andy Tomlinson*

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*Left – Mike lowering off Boot Flake.*

*Photo Tom Evans*

*Right – Andy belayed after the Great Roof with Mike clamping. Photo Tom Evans*



*Andy clamping up to Camp 5.*

*Photo Dan Stickland*

soon as the rope was secured, Mike clamped up quickly and dispatched the next pitch without incident. I arrived at the top of Dolt Tower to find Mike smiling. 'Look what I've found' he said; there on the ledge were four gallons of water. We had had long discussions about the amount of water needed before starting. The general consensus amongst the other teams in Camp 4 was that we needed significantly more than we planned to take, but Mike's view was that 'the less we take the lighter 'The Pig' will be to haul', and he was the expert after all! It had been a very long day and we were totally dehydrated. If the extra water had not been there... it was not worth contemplating. Sleep came around 1.00am.

Dawn arrived all too quickly but with it an easy decision to have a quieter day; three pitches to the El Cap Tower bivvy site appealed and would allow time to recover. We made quick progress. What a fantastic place it was and at last I was atop this Tower that I had only dared to dream I would reach one day. To enable a quick start the next day we fixed the next pitch, the famous Texas Flake chimney, which Mike led flawlessly. Was I glad that it had been his lead! He noted, laconically, that there had been no gear when he had climbed it last time; now there is one bolt halfway up the 70ft pitch!

We abseiled back to El Cap Tower, brewed up and watched the colours change on Cathedral Rocks across the valley as the sun went down. As darkness descended voices were suddenly heard below; our peace was shattered as Pete and Dan finished New Dawn and joined us on the bivvy site. We had got to know these two young lads well in Camp 4; both were eager to gain as much information on aid-climbing as possible and had quickly realized that Mike had much to teach. They were learning quickly and New Dawn was another feather in their cap. It was great to have their company; the enthusiasm of youth is infectious!

Next morning, breakfast and bodily functions sorted we packed and clamped back to our high point. I set off across the bolt ladder from the top of Texas Flake. Looking back at Mike hanging out on the belay stance it suddenly hit me... what a great place this was to be and how lucky I was to be climbing with Mike. The aid-climbing absorbed me; attention to detail is such an essential part of ensuring a safe and uncomplicated outcome – similar to my professional work as an anaesthetist, I mused! A minor wobble brought me back to reality, and the top of Boot Flake! Looking down Dan and Pete had joined Mike at the Texas Flake stance; no time to waste. I hauled as Mike clamped and soon Mike, 'The Pig' and I were safely reunited.

The day progressed. Mike dispatched the 'King Swing' and more pitches followed. As the light faded I led up to Camp 4 with a minor squawk as I took flight again!

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Dawn broke and I looked up to see what looked like a huge whale's tail above me; the Great Roof. One pitch to its base and it was my lead. What a fantastic aid-pitch it turned out to be and I was moving quickly. I had been constantly frustrated by the time it took me to lead pitches and yet more so about the time it took me to set up belays. At last, it appeared, I was getting it sorted! The stance at the end of this pitch was quite incredible; 2000ft sheer to the valley floor... the exposure was growing on me.

One pitch later we let Dan and Pete through. They were climbing more quickly and, whilst it was great to have their company, we did not want to feel rushed. They headed for Camp 6; we opted for Camp 5 at a more leisurely pace! Mike and I had worked out a great system at the end of each day; I emptied the Pig and sorted the gear, whilst Mike cooked. It was all coming together. The light faded as we settled for the night and then we heard voices below. Now Camp 5 is a small place; an eyrie high above the valley floor, almost flat but with room for just two! Out of sight two American lads settled for an uncomfortable night on a ledge just below; despite having given up on a sub-24 hour ascent they were very chilled. Next morning we all headed to Camp 6 early. The weather had changed and I, for one, wanted out! Mike, sanguine as ever, refused to plan anything beyond the next pitch; indeed he was keen for another night on the 'Wall' as he was certain this would be his last big wall route! The rain arrived at the top of Pitch 29 and with it a short discussion with our new-found friends. We agreed to join forces. As the second clamped up to join us the other led through on our ropes, at speed, linking two pitches in one with gear immaculately placed but widely spaced to save time! We all clamped quickly to the next belay stance; just two pitches to the top! Despite the weather Mike and I wanted to climb the last two pitches ourselves, so our American friends bade farewell and sped on. As a consequence of extreme tiredness, climbing the next pitch, setting up the belay and hauling took me



*Left – Mike cooking at Camp 5.  
Right – Andy and Mike at the bottom...finally!*



*Photo Andy Tomlinson  
Photo Brian Roberts*

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forever! As Mike set of up the Head Wall all looked to be sorted. The rain fell and darkness descended. Communication was impossible. The rope went tight and it was time to start. My life went before me as I whimpered and swung into space then clamped up the rope as it snaked over the overhanging headwall then horizontally right on wet rope, in the dark, without a head-torch, in space 3000ft above the valley floor. Scared, no, shit scared, I fully appreciated how much life meant to me. Voices at last; I clamped up the final slabs which were streaming with water. It would have been a death trap to lead but fortunately our American friends had left their rope in place for us to clamp. They were now itching to descend the Eastern Ledges and wanted us to join them. Mike and I looked at each other; a death sentence or what? Slippery granite slabs ending above a 2000ft overhanging wall in the dark and dog-tired. We felt guilty as we made our excuses and opted for the safe approach. We were confident we would find a dry bivvy site somewhere nearby. Needless to say no such dry spot was found. It was raining and we were cold and wet, so we dumped the gear for collection the next day and headed to the valley, or at least that was the plan. Unfortunately I got it wrong turning off into the High Sierra by mistake! It took five hours of stumbling around in the dark before we accepted that we were lost. After ditching the remaining gear and food some distance away, in case any local bears came visiting, we settled for a cold, damp and miserable night.



*Mike leaving the top of El Cap... for the last time?*

*Photo Andy Tomlinson*

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Up early, we retraced our steps to the top of El Cap and in the light my wrong turning became obvious. But the sun was now out so, whilst the gear dried, we relaxed and ate the last of our food before heading down the Eastern Ledges. Mike found the perfect route (the best of his five descents he said!) to the final abseil; what a star. Descending from the base I finally relaxed. We were safely down and what a great trip it had been. My thoughts were interrupted by shouts, obviously addressed to us; why the anxious tones? Well, only because we topped out 24 hours ago and all at Camp 4 were wondering what had happened to us; they were even getting a search party ready!

As always, I had been planning in advance: my dream throughout the past 48 hours had been for a shower, shave, pizza and beer at Curry Camp! Mike, laid back as always, advised me to chill and take life as it came. On this occasion though I got my way! Sleep came easily that night. The next day we returned to the Meadows and, drinking cold beers, sat and gazed up at the Big Stone immersed in our thoughts. For me, quiet satisfaction, and a realisation that it had been a privilege to climb it with Mike on his last big wall outing. And then: 'what next for us?' I was planning already!