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Climber portrait: John Middendorf. Images copyrighted by John Middendorf.

On the Cover: An Exclusive Interview - John Middendorf's Iconic Ascent of the East Face of the Great Trango Tower

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John Middendorf, inventor, family man, and Yosemite legend talks to us about one of the most epic ascents in history. He was also kind enough to send us some fabulous images which made it so hard to choose from! Each was stellar. This exclusive was such an honor for our magazine. The Great Trango Tower is truly the stuff of dreams, a beautiful rock with incredible lines on it, and yet a great taskmaster. Luckily, our two intrepid and highly experienced climbers made it to the summit and back, and thus sent the stunning feat into mountaineering history books forever.

Editor: We're extremely honored to interview you and appreciate your time, John.

John: I so appreciate it. It is very good timing to reflect on my climbing days--currently my family (wife Jeni, 8 year old son Rowen, and 2 year old daughter Remi) and I have been traveling for six months around Australia with an off-road camper trailer. It has been amazing to reconnect with the outdoor lifestyle and share it with our kids. At the moment we are finishing our trip with a two-week sojourn at Arapiles,

the finest crag on the planet, before we return to work and school in Tasmania, where we live. Rowen and I have been climbing multipitch routes at Arapiles and having a wonderful time, while Jeni and Remi have enjoyed some toproped climbs.

The other night some climbers asked me about big walls and the 'ole days', so I shared some stories with images projected on the water tower in the Pines campground. Seemed like about 50 people showed up to this spontaneous event, which prompted the telling of more stories, so hopefully I will be in good nick to recount some tales here!

Editor: How very fortunate they were to hear your stories! We might have to interview you more than once, John.

Let's begin this interview by asking you how you got into climbing? How old were you when you did your first climb and where was this?

John: I was never good at team sports, so I dreaded the summertime sports leagues which were often humiliating experiences to say the least (occasionally playing in the 9th inning when our team was already a dozen runs ahead). My mom noticed my agony and based on a tip from her cousin, sent me off to the Telluride Mountaineering School in Colorado for a 35 day outdoor camp when I was 14 years old. The camp was run by Dave Farny, a true survivalist, whose philosophy revolved around hardship creating character. The first morning we were awoken at 4am for an hour of pre-dawn calisthenics, then run up to a near frozen lake at 10,000 feet above sea level for a mandatory morning dip.

The camp included a strong introduction to climbing, and from the first moment I set foot on the granite slabs between Silverton and Durango with our heavy vibram soled boots, ascending (and descending) rock felt so natural, I fell in love with the vertical world in an instant. Four years later I returned to the camp to work as one of the youngest mountain

guides Dave had ever hired.

At first climbing was only a summertime activity at the Telluride Mountaineering School, but then I met a friend John Ely while attending the local public school in McLean,Virginia. John had climbed a bit and wanted to learn more; I was the "expert" because I had knowledge of a few more knots than John, but together we equipped ourselves with a static caving line and a few slings and carabiners, and learned to free climb at Carderock. We became quite good in short order, and by 1978 we were leading 5.11 at the Gunks, which was quite a hard rating for those days.

In 1977, John and I borrowed my older sister's car and drove out to California to see Yosemite. Galen Rowell's 1974 Half Dome article in National Geographic enthralled us, and sure enough, when I first saw the big face of Half Dome, I know in an instant that the big rock walls was what it was all about for me--my career as a rock climber was set in stone (so to speak) in that moment--everything would become training for the big stones. During that first two-week trip to Yosemite we climbed two shorter walls as well as the Northwest Face of Half Dome. At age 17, we were quite young big wall climbers of the era.

Editor: That is amazing...wow. Who were your contemporaries and what do you remember most about them?

The legendary Kim Schmitz speaks highly of you.

John: I have so much respect for Kim, who was of the 'generation' before mine. Yvon Chouinard is famously quoted as Yosemite being the training arena for the wider mountain ranges, and the epitome of this idea was Kim's ascent in the Karakoram of Uli Biaho Tower with Bill Forrest, John Roskelly, and Ron Kauk in 1979. It was a giant step in "alpine-style" big wall climbing (alpine-style refers to the commitment

involved in eschewing fixed ropes to the ground, a style advocated and pioneered by Robbins in Yosemite in the 60's).

The idea of building skills in Yosemite in order to advance standards in the mountains became central to my dreams as well. After I graduated with an engineering degree from Stanford in 1983, I actually sold all my climbing gear and pursued job interviews on my 1970 BMW R60/5 motorcycle--everything I owned fit into the saddlebags (I only kept my shoes, chalkbag, and a red 2" tubular webbing swami belt). Those were the Reagan years and despite my structural and renewable energy focus at Stanford, all the jobs available seemed to be defense related and frankly, unappealing. What was to be a quick visit to Yosemite before I entered the 'real world', when Werner Braun mentioned an opening on the Yosemite Search and Rescue Team, I jumped at the chance and consequently spent the next three and half years living in a tent in Camp 4, climbing and working rescues.

Contempories and friends include John Bachar, Scott Cosgrove, Walt Shipley, Dave Shultz, John Yablonski, Mike Lechlinkski, Rick Cashner, Mike Corbett, Steve Bosque, Ron Kauk, Russ Walling, Bill Russell, Doug Macdonald, Tracy Dorton, Troy Johnson, Jim May (Banny Root), Rick Albushcat, Eric Zschiesche, Dimitri Barton, Scott Burke, Steve Bartlett, Steve Quinlan, Mugs Stump, Grant Hiskes, Al Swanson, Steve Schneider, Dan McDivett, Sue Bonovich, Kurt Smith, Jo Whitford, Mike Paul, Roland Arsons, Steve Gerberding, Dean Fidelman, Dave Altman, Rob Oravetz, Lidija Painkiher, Bob Shonerd, Charles Cole, Steve Grossman, Peter Croft, John Barbella, Sue Harrington, John Harpole, Tucker Tech, Eliott Robinson, Bob Palais; just to name a few!

Back in those days, most people focused on the free climbing that Yosemite had to offer, but even the most committed free climbers would occasionally foray up the big stones as a rite of passage. Then there were a smaller elite who would devote more time to the big walls and I include myself in that group. But in a way, I kind of bridged the gap

between the two groups, spending a lot of time free climbing with the 'mostly free climbers': Werner, Bachar, Schultz, Cosgrove, and MacDonald, and the 'mostly wall climbers': Mike Corbett, Steve Bosque, John Barbella, and Walt Shipley (though Walt later focused solely on free climbing to establish some 5.13's). In my time in Yosemite, I averaged a wall per month--not a big deal by today's standards, but more on the prolific side of things back then. Only Corbett had done more walls. There was also a group who seemed to specialise in hanging about in Camp 4 and the Deli, ensuring fun hang-out partners on rest days!

Editor: How did the idea to climb one of the most difficult and tallest rock walls on the planet come about? Was it your idea or your team's? What attracted you to the magnificent and mind-blowingly high Great Trango Tower?

John: I always dreamed of taking the big wall skills learned in Yosemite to the mountains, and made an unsuccessful attempt at new route in Baffin Island in the mid-80's. But my big wall climbing gear business required a lot of my time and though I was actively doing a lot of new routes in the late 1980's and early 1990's, I hadn't been planning any major expeditions. Plus there was very little interest in remote big wall expeditions in the USA at the time, meaning that all funding and equipment had to be self-organised. The Europeans, on the other hand, had a stronger interest in facilitating expeditions, and in 1992, my good friend Xaver Bongard initiated a Swiss expedition to the Trango Towers. By that time Xaver and I had done several new big wall routes in Yosemite and Zion together, and he invited me on the trip. After our long journey into the Baltoro Glacier, once Xaver and I saw the huge East Face of Great Trango Tower, we knew it was our challenge. We spent a week ferrying loads to the base and mapping out the route with binoculars, then set off for the adventure of our lives.

Editor: Would you walk us through some of the technicalities of this climb that really made an impression on you?

John: The route we chose to climb began on the overhanging East Face (there was one established route on this side of Great Trango--the Dungee Glacier side--the famous and tragic Norwegian Route, which headed up the 3200' lower-angled northeast apron of Great Trango Tower, then up the 2000' vertical headwall). My experience mapping out new routes in Yosemite incorporated studying and mapping features on a wall in various stages of sunlight and shadow at different times of the day, and helped me to identify shallow corners, flakes and features that ensured we could climb the overhanging 2400' lower East Face with a minimum of drilled holes, which is really the name of the game: finding natural lines. This section was largely A4 climbing connecting features--and a lot of hooks!

Once past the lower East Face, we climbed a distinct line on the upper 2000' upper vertical headwall--but there was a big unknown. This route was entirely facing north, and no one had ever spent multiple days and nights on a north facing Himalayan/Karakoram big wall in big wall 'alpine-style', which refers to the committing style of eschewing fixed ropes to the ground. Yet at the time I was confident in my recent portaledge designs which would enable us to survive in fierce conditions above 6000 metres.

Editor: Fascinating! How tough were the weather conditions you and your team endured?

John: We largely had fine conditions, meaning temperatures hovering just above freezing during the day and below freezing at night, but with blessed mellow winds. But just as we were within a couple days climb to the summit, we got hit by a major Karakoram storm and were forced

to hunker down for three days and nights. It was an intense blizzard, and the winds were fierce and sometimes the portalege was lifted a foot in the air with both of us in it, then slammed back down again. I frequently doubted my engineering of our lightweight titanium portaledge frame, but it withstood the pounding, as well as the fly protected us from the elements. Prior to this A5 ledge design, there was no technology that could have withstood such conditions.

Editor: Indeed! Were there many more precarious moments? That's one tricky mountain.

It seems that Ali Baba's Couloir was making things difficult for a while at the start.

John: Before setting off for this climb, I had to rationalise that each day was a good day to die. It's a different mind set I can't even imagine now, with a wonderful family and kids, but back then, there was a clear acceptance of the danger which involved accepting possible death. Every day felt precarious. We got hit, or nearly hit, every day by avalanches of huge chunks of ice and rock triggered by the relative warmth of the day, plus we were sticking it out on the hard aid, often looking at dangerous falls which would had the potential to injure--and an injured climber might not be able to make it out in those remote and inaccessible places.

I appreciated Xaver's sixth sense in the mountains when, as we were front pointing up the approach with heavy loads on our back. Xaver was slightly ahead of me, and had tucked himself in the only safe place in the entire couloir which was also the start of the route. Suddenly he yelled to me, "JOHN, DECIDE UP OR DOWN, IN A MINUTE YOU WILL DIE!!" meaning that I had the opportunity to go down a bit to a bit of safety on a rocky arete we had passed. I doubled my upward speed, and

huffing and puffing joined him at the safe spot when a huge avalanche swept the gulley which would have surely been my end.

Another moment of intense fear came when we were finally 'blasting' on the route after three trips getting our gear to the base. Right as we were ascending the initial pitches, two huge blocks the size of school buses fell out of a huge eyebrow flake 2200 feet above us. Usually with rockfall, if you look up and see the rock apparently moving left or right, you know that it is not directly above. But these blocks, seemingly moving in slow motion at first, were only getting bigger. Xaver and I yelled to each other to hug the rock, and after what seemed like an eternity, the rocks sailed past 30 feet directly behind us--due to the fact the wall overhung. The impact of these two massive rocks created a huge mini-blizzard for a few minutes, and the two huge craters in the ice gulley below were constant reminders for the rest of the climb of the inherent dangers.

It wasn't until we were firmly on the Dungee Glacier 18 days later that we felt the huge relief that we were unlikely to die in the following few minutes.

Editor: Gosh, this like imagining a high stakes adventure movie on the big screen! Holy smokes, only all this was the real deal! Simply incredible.

How many days did it take you to summit with your partner?

John: It was 15 days climbing up. Actually fairly fast time considering the 4400' of modern wall climbing, hard 5.10 free climbing, and technical thin ice climbing involved on the climb.

Editor: And how many days did it take to descend?

John: Three full days rappelling. We thought it would only take us two days, and had jettisoned a haul bag which included our bulky sleeping bags on the second morning. But when we got close to the approach gulley, we found it too dangerous to descend, or even cross, as there were periodic slush avalanches coming down every half hour. After a cold, cold night at 16,000 feet with no bivy gear, we crossed the slush channel at first light and continued down the rock buttress adjacent to the gulley. 44 rappels later, we made it to the Dungee!

Editor: What I find fascinating is that you designed and constructed your own portaledges…that is so impressive, John. You're a climber as well as an inventor.

John: Thank you. Yes, I am very proud of developing the world's first truly weatherproof portaledges. The develop of the A5 portaledge was an iterative process of design, personally testing, and refining the design based on input from the world's best big wall climbers. The 1990's saw a huge explosion of new standards in remote 'alpine-style' big wall climbing, and literally every expedition had one of our portaledge designs. I also designed quite a bit of other kit, such as a hefty big wall hammer, a versatile and effective hand drill, waterproof haulbags, various clean climbing tools to make aid safer and cleaner, to name a few.

Editor: I'm sure these inventions are absolute must-haves on the rock.

And now for the one question we all want to ask you…describe the view from the top. What thoughts and feeling/emotions were going through your mind? The Nameless Tower was also in sight at the summit.

You were standing at a spot not many in this world will ever be able to

experience. We're eager to know what it felt like.

John: When you are climbing on a big wall, you only get at best a 180 degree view if you are on a flat wall, or in our case, a narrow 80 degree view of the world, as we had climbed most of the preceding week in a shallow right facing corner. So when we got to the top to see our first 360 degree view in a long while, the view of the big giants of the Karakoram was breathtaking, and the giant growing shadows of Great Trango and Nameless on the glacier were stunning. But only had a few minutes to savor the view, as daylight was fading by the time we had climbed the 600' technical alpine snow and ice ridge to the summit. And as Xaver so astutely wrote: "In the course of the climb, you feel strong, invincible, and ready to face any dangers, then during the descent, courage abandons you." So we switched into another mode in short order. But still, when I reflect on magic moments of my climbing career, that instant of bliss is really the highlight.

(More here: **http://bigwalls.net/climb/XGrand.html**)

Editor: Here's an important question that truly defines a climber, and you have spectacularly stellar record of climbs.

What drew you toward climbing big walls?

What has climbing given to you and to your life?

John: I was always drawn to big walls as the ultimate extension of rock climbing, perhaps it was the unlikely outcomes and greater degree of unknown. Or perhaps just the higher level of commitment I perceived in big wall challenges. Thus, my success in climbing has given me a confidence in overcoming challenges. Today, being a dad is the greatest challenge, and every day I value the reflection involved to improve

myself and those I love around me.

Editor: That is the most beautiful answer ever, not only are you one of the world's best climbers, inventor of extremely useful climbing gear, but also a wonderful husband and caring father. We are very proud of you!

What are your thoughts on the preservation of nature and climate change?

John: As an engineer, it seems clear to me that large chaotic systems such as Earth's eco-system have tipping points. I think there are obvious signs currently, such as the melting and separation of large ice sheets in Antarctica. But whether or not humans will be able to adjust to the possible dramatic changes that will come from triggering a tipping point is unclear. Most likely there will be geographic winners and losers. It seems cheap insurance to politically implement safeguards such as subsidising renewables (which eventually will be the cheapest form of energy anyway), and the lack of such action will likely lead to continued violence for resources. My prayers are that the likely geopolitical transitions caused by resource shortages (including water) will be more peaceful for my children's generation.

http://johnmiddendorf.net
http://bigwalls.net

Editor: Indeed, it shall be. Thanks for spending some time with us, John, and for sharing an iconic climb by truly masterful mountaineers.

I hope the younger generations will read this and be truly inspired by your epic ascent.

John: Sure appreciate it. I felt my work in developing new climbing products was truncated in 1999 due to circumstance, but I hope to sometime to return to developing new tools, such a new lightweight single-point bivy system, for the new generation to enable higher goals. I still have a few unfinished ideas! Cheers!

Interview conducted by Vera H. Kaikobad L. Ac.
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