

**The Tower** by Ken McNutt  
May 1970

The hanging, hissing lantern cast gigantic shadows as four men racked hardware, recoiled new Perlon, and gulped down mouthfuls of cereal, milk, and blueberry pie at 4 AM in a cold, quiet Yosemite Camp 12. We had just arrived from L.A. at midnight and were only half awake after about three hours of fitful sleep. It was two days before Easter and snow on the Valley rim made sure down jackets and foot sacks were packed first in the haul bags, for two bivouacs were possible. All gear was loaded into the VW bus and the too brief ride to the Bridalveil Falls parking lot finally convinced me that apparently nothing was going to save me from my robot madness and I was indeed committed to a "no retreat" climb on what Roper's red book called, "the most spectacular overhanging wall in the world," THE LEANING TOWER.

As we loaded the crush of gear on our backs I stared upward in the still black morning, eyes straining in vain to see the Leaning Tower that I knew loomed almost overhead. We trudged single file up the boulder-strewn steep approach through ankle deep leaves and moss, silent except for the deep breathing that soon became rhythmic with our stride. With Don Lauria setting a rapid pace we soon lost sight and sound of our second rope team in the thick forest behind us. When we reached the edge of the Tower Traverse, I heard a voice call from the darkness below, "Dooohn-Hellooow, Dooohn." When I answered back a quavering voice floated up, "Wee'rre noottt coooommming." At that moment my eyes rolled up in their sockets, and in the first weak grey light the Tower leaned its intimidating profile over us, and I could readily see why the second rope changed its mind.

As I leaned backwards to identify the higher pitches, my throat and mouth became instantly parched as every drop of saliva drained in one flush toward my tense belly. Don's, "We rope up here," jolted me into automatic response and into a bowline entwined swami belt. With the admonishment, "Test everything, it's all rotten," Don disappeared out on the Tower Traverse. I soon followed, awkward and unbalanced with the heavy haul sack on my back, and joined Don at the base of the twisted tree from whose tip top branch the route started.

Don flowed up the bolt ladder, never pausing except to snap in the carabiner, clip in the slings, step high, clip in the rope, and climb up and up, The red haul line already hung six feet out from the wall and it was only the 1st pitch. Up I came, so engrossed in my deliberate activity and obsessed with not making any serious mistakes, I was oblivious to the sphincteral-tightening exposure.

All day we climbed in the overhanging shadow; nailing, bolting, hauling, and cleaning until late afternoon when the sun finally bathed us with mild warmth. Bolt placements were just at the end of a maximum reach from top loops, the pin placements were acceptable and the rock was clean and firm. The strenuous nailing and Jumaring caused the first severe arm cramps I had ever experienced and until I forced myself to relax into better balance, they were unrelenting in their discomfort

After four pitches Don was on Guano Ledge, and as I cleaned that pitch it was apparent we would not have daylight enough to complete the next two pitches and rappel back down to bivouac on Guano/Ahwanee Ledge. This rappel is possible only from the end of the sixth pitch and it leaves the rappeller many feet out from the wall trying to pendulum in and grab and hang on ... to something ... in the dark?? Since that maneuver held no special appeal to me, I strongly recommended we make the 5th class traverse from Guano to Ahwanee--in the daylight and bivouac—now!

We traversed and prepared for our first night on the Tower. Don's upperledge position established him as host/server and he opened cans and passed food and drink to my lover ledge. I smashed one can, dropped it from the ledge, and counted 32 seconds before it hit anything.

The cyclops eye of the Wawona Tunnel glowed dully on the far slope, and intermittently from its center the headlights of an arriving car would splash out and run down the winding road to the Valley floor. As we sought stretched out positions on our ledges, loud, hollering voices rose from the Bridalveil lot and we knew our friends were enjoying the Valley Happy Hour. Don philosophized briefly on the relative merits of doing SHORT, fierce climbs that allowed one to participate in the nightly Valley merriment, versus LONG, difficult climbs that hold the charm of controlled discomfort, stoicism, and no nightly socializing. My wise reply that some of both types offered the best of all possible climbing worlds was wasted on Don's snoring. Sleep came late for me as I had caught a quick look at the next lead off Guano Ledge, and I knew some hard A4 would arrive with the dawn,.

Ahwanee Ledge slowly came alive at 4 AM the next morning and gear was repacked in the haul bag. Fortified with "Red Mountain" and salami the traverse back to Guano Ledge in the dark with the heavy haul bag was a warming way to begin the day (any day). It was my lead, but I was glad when Don stated, "I'll lead---stay alive cause I'll need some tension on these first pins." Up a polished slope to a bolt--clip in and traverse around a shoulder--into

space--and struggle to hang on while pounding the first pin into a long right, then left, switch-back crack. Don's comments continued violent until easier nailing arrived. Cleaning this pitch advanced my dangling in space--double-angle overhang--open book--rotten right-hand crack--rotten left-hand crack--Jumar technique!

The next two pitches were uneventful, but with the Garden pitch came the only series of really lousy pins on the entire climb. First was a bad pin followed by a worse pin until there were no pins, and while standing on a pitifully placed nut trying to place--quickly, quickly--two nested knifeblades that popped so hard when I half tested them, I damn near dropped pins, tie-off loop, slings, and my poise.

A tendon-tearing stretch required a knifeblade inserted into an absolute no-crack-at-all. How sweet the twang as I drove it to the eye; next, step up fast, with not even a thought of a test.

I was sooo happy with that knifeblade I ignored the next fixed bolt at the belay point and grabbed the small tree extending out from the vertical wall, pulled up out of my aid slings, wrapped one leg around the tree only to find there was no room to squeeze my body between tree and wall, so there I hung like an armored sloth, my happiness turning to panic at my stupid predicament. As I struggled I heard Don shout from below, "Can't you clip in your belay seat?" Cursing my panic and hanging by my heel and one hand, I fumbled my belay seat out of my pocket--around my butt--clipped into the slung tree and sat down. Whew, kinda close.

Up the pitch raced Don cleaning my bad pins with single hammer blows and commenting, "not much to that pin... that was a baaaad pin ... no wonder you were in a hurry on that one, etc., etc."

Past my belay he climbed through the octopus branches of that demon tree—"I'm coming back with a saw and prune you into a damned ladder"--a mini bong under an overhanging block and he disappeared over the block.

Cleaning that difficult, awkward slanting pitch, unclipping and reclipping above each pin, remembering how disastrous it is to step into a Jumar that has not locked back onto the rope, going as fast as possible, and I was on the small ledge where Don was looking up at the 10th and last pitch.

Since the sun had set and night was rushing up the Valley walls, I was quite willing, even eager, to bivouac on that small ledge. But then Don said we were out of water (he had substituted the bottle of "Mountain Red" for one quart of water), I agreed we should try for the summit even though it was obvious we would complete it in the pitch black, moonless night. When Don asked me if I felt up to the lead, I alibied, "Sure, but you know how slow I nail in the dark!"

Without another word Don started to lead that pitch after cautioning me to be careful of removing the corner carabiner, since I would pendulum and might not be able to retrieve the pin. Darkness obliterated him after five pins and shortly after he called down, "You're tied off," I hollered for his flashlight and down it came on the hand line.

With the flashlight clenched in my teeth so tightly I expected the plastic case to shatter, I unclipped the rope from the corner carabiner and swung out into the black abyss. I missed grabbing the carabiner and sling when I swung back, but four tries later I made it, braced my feet against the wall, and struck one blow to remove the pin when the flashlight went out, ray arms were tiring fast so I clipped the rope back in the sling/carabiner, took one double-rope wrap around my waist to hold me, and contemplated this ridiculous development, Finally, to Hell with the pin, I'll cut the sling and save the carabiner, so out comes my very sharp knife and my fist plays braille along the rope. This is the rope--this is the sling--and this is my fatiguing fist. OK to cut the sling, try not to slice the fist, but NEVER cut the rope. The knife cut the sling and I was catapulted out from the wall. I started Jumaring before I quit swinging. Up on Jumars--bang on pin--unclip--reclip--and use braille to pound out the pins. I left six pins and three carabiners behind in the dark until the flashlight came back on so that light was available to finish cleaning the pitch and to set up the bivouac just below the summit.

Lovely pitch next morning. Clear and cold. We dashed up the 3rd class summit then made two short rappels, followed by ledge scrambling that finally led to the base of the wall. We took a last look at the route, picked up our debris, and charged off for a gallon of orange juice, steak and eggs, and friends.

### Epilogue

Ken McNutt died of cancer back in 1995. He was in his early seventies. We all respected the physical strength and mental acuity housed in the well-structured body of a man who was much older than any of us. He was an aerospace engineer, a mountaineer, a rockclimber, a mountain guide, and a superb bicyclist. He was a member of the Southern California Rockclimbing Section of the Sierra Club back in the sixties. This was his first and only Yosemite wall climb.