

Petit Dru, West Face Direttissima

JOHN HARLIN*

I STARTED mixed climbing of an Alpine standard at an early age and found it much to my personal taste. I had never been very interested in pure rock climbing, despite its challenge; but a few years ago looking at the Petit Dru, I became intrigued with its 3500 feet of sheer granite. It seemed to me that there should be a route directly up the diamond of the West Face. There was none. That big diamond on a mountain which has become an alpine symbol has an attraction. So over a relatively long period of time, the desire and plan to do the Dru's *direttissima* took form.

Although I understand that the late English climber, Robin Smith, had contemplated the route years ago, I was quite unaware of anyone's interest in this as a possible route. In fact, I was not sure that the "direct" was valid. The nature of the route was not revealed until further study and an actual attempt had thoroughly acquainted me with the intricacies of the face. Once I stood on the top of the grey ledges themselves and looked up at that soaring face with its great barriers of overhangs, some of which were the biggest I had seen in granite, I realized the magnitude of the problem and was challenged.

Contrary to most route possibilities where one has the option to detour large overhangs, this route forces one to tackle each in turn. Another rather negative aspect was the two great white scars of recent rockfall which are inhospitable areas of loose, fractured blocks and detachable flakes. Nature has not had the opportunity to wash clean her sculpturing.

In the summer of 1964, the Dru's *direttissima* became a project. Royal Robbins, with whom I was in correspondence, advised me of a fellow coming from the States that summer. His name was Lito Tejada-Flores. Royal recommended him highly both as a fine climbing partner, and, what is more important, as a fine person. So when I met Lito in the Biolet camp ground, he was already known to me. Thus, Lito and I joined forces for this climb in July.

*Killed on the Eigerwand Direttissima, March 22, 1966. An obituary will appear in the *A.A.J.*, 1967.

We put up a high camp on the *rognon*, a rock spur below the face, with the help of another American climber, Court Richards. Nick Estcourt, president of the Cambridge Mountaineering Club, joined us as well, for we were thinking in terms of a party of three with one man always prusiking with the loads. On granite, where secure anchors can be placed quickly, this is a good method. It allows the team to move rapidly and relatively unencumbered and with good photographic possibilities.

We had been talking earlier to Gary Hemming, who had convinced us that the best way to start the route was via the *socle* (divorced lower section of face) instead of the couloir. This creates an extremely long (1000 meters plus) route. My disagreement was and still is, that this completely goes against the grain of rock, thereby forcing the route a little too much. Anyone who has studied the face will see what I mean, although like Gary, he may still disagree. The rock of the two lower sections of the face has a grain or crack and chimney system that leans far to the left and is completely separate from the main or upper part of the true West Face. Forcing a direct line to later continue on the upper face is to swim against a current. So, swim we did that summer.

One cold morning in July under clear skies, the three of us left our tents behind and embarked on our adventure. The *socle* went fast via the Robbins-Hemming route, and soon we were tackling new ground, heading slightly diagonally toward the top of the grey ledges, a system of platforms and scree just below the monolithic portion of the face. The going got rough, particularly the changing from one crack system to another in order to bear right to the start of the upper face. Flaring cracks and difficult climbing brought us very late and very tired to the desired spot at the top of the grey ledges. We had done more than fifteen rope-lengths of highly technical climbing, both free and artificial, and we were satisfied. However, looking up, we were certainly intimidated by the fantastic problem that lay before us. It is very similar to the overwhelming impression the Eiger "direct" gives from the top of the second icefield — small man, damn big mountain!

The next day, we started up just at the left border of the first rock scar, and sure enough, the rotten nature of the rock caused some gripping moments. Higher up, small overhangs that we hardly counted as overhangs, being so dwarfed by their big brothers, suddenly became overhangs of ten and fifteen feet. Around and up one of these I bade Lito to take the lead to give me a rest. I was anchored just on top of the lip of the overhang on a small ledge to the side of my anchor pins. A little

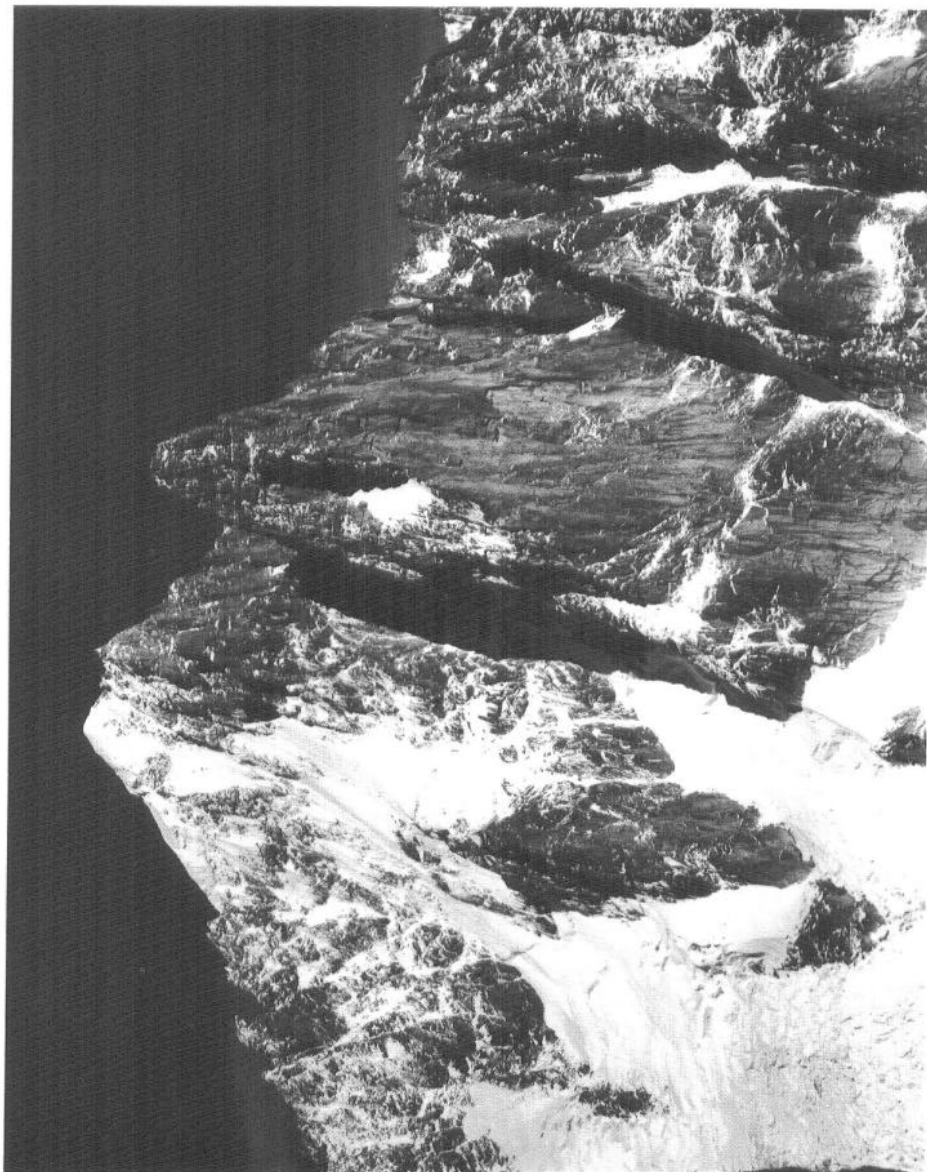


PLATE 57

AIGUILLES DU DRU. The Petit Dru is on the right. The direttissima ascends the west face up the lighter-colored rock on the right.

Photo by Bradford Washburn



Photo by Bradford Washburn

Close-up of the upper part of the West face of the PETIT DRU.

PLATE 58



PLATES 59 and 60

Photos by John Harlin

Lito Tejada-Flores on the PETIT DRU Direttissima attempt, 1964.





PLATE 61 *Photos by John Harlin*

Robbins on PETIT DRU
Direttissima, 1965.

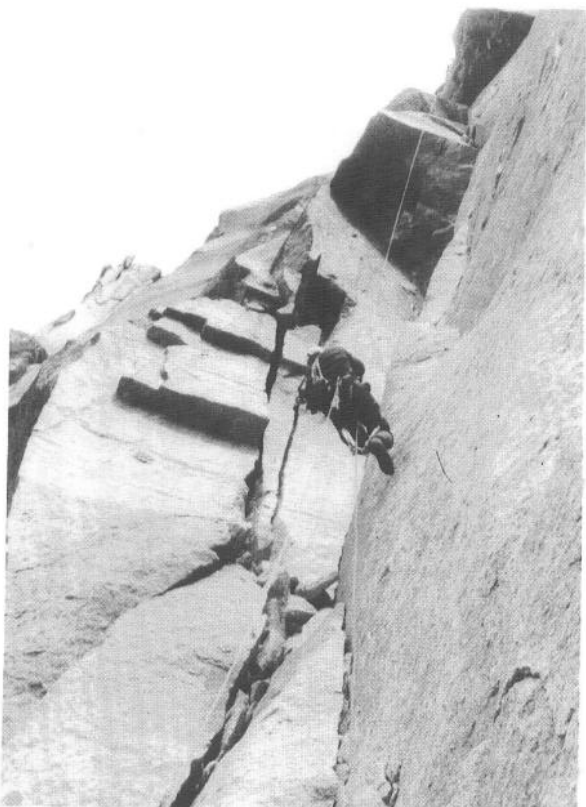


PLATE 62

Tejada-Flores prusiking on
attempt, 1964.



PLATE 63 *Photo by John Harlin*

Tejada-Flores in bivouac,
PETIT DRU, 1964.



PLATE 64 *Photo by Royal Robbins*

Harlin in bivouac, 1965.

above me, Lito and a flake disagreed as to relative security, the pin popped out and down came Lito. I was pulled from my stance. The anchor held, while I in turn held Lito from falling an additional hundred and fifty feet by the rope around my back. While our hearts were beginning to beat again, we watched the pack with our radios and down equipment bounce 1500 feet toward the couloir. Nick looked up from a ledge below and asked what the hell kind of a climbing maneuver we were trying to perform. Luckily, damn luckily, a piton was left in the lip of the overhang, and we got a step sling on it. Then our eyes widened as the piton shifted several degrees with our weight. It held though, and we got back to the belay ledge, needless-to-say shaken and minus equipment.

We left fixed rope and retreated. That evening, during our descent, a storm came in. As we crossed a couloir near the bottom, we found the down equipment. Lightning flashes betrayed their color in the stream bed. At least some luck was with us.

Disgusted, we went to the Dolomites.

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Even more disgusted, we returned to Chamonix. It was evidently another one of those seasons!

Another attempt with Lito, Pierre Mazeaud and Roberto Sorgato ended with bad weather and high winds dampening spirits just above our last high point. Finished with the Dru that summer, we packed up our high camp and left. The climb had long ago ceased to be fun.

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Summer 1965 — a new season comes — but what a season! It would have been better if it had stayed winter for one would at least have been able to ski.

We began the long-talked-about International School of Mountaineering and despite the weather, it went well. I mentioned to Royal that of all the possible new routes this year, the *direttissima* on the Petit Dru would be one of the most feasible because its verticality would not hold the snow long. Royal was particularly interested, this being his brand of climbing. So throughout the summer, we instructed in the climbing school with an eye to the weather and plans to try the Dru.

On one occasion, in July, we started on our approach across the Mer de Glace, hoping that the rain would stop and that we could take advantage of the beginning of a good weather cycle. However, on the second day, the deluge only increased.

On still another occasion, we got as high as the top of the grey ledges

by climbing directly from the second couloir intersection. This route makes a straight line with the upper part of the route that we later did from bottom to top. We climbed to the grey ledges, after a long series of difficult free climbing pitches quoted as 5.8 and 5.9, interrupted by one artificial pitch using the large pitons called bonges. Here we received our weather report. Of course, it was bad, which meant another retreat, although the temptation was to throw reason to the wind and to blunder on. These many frustrations were hard to take.

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But the dawn of a new day always brings more hope. It is amazing how this commodity is continually reborn. So on August 9, two thoroughly determined figures go over the check list of equipment as it is packed away.

The long plod up the moraine — Those hours of back-bending weight — The same scenery — Tracks in the trail — Moving specks up the moraine — Others on the *rognon* — "Good Lord, there's an army ahead" — Dusk — Bivouac among Germans, Czechs, Japs, French, Austrians, British, Poles — These numbers, a sign of accident or death in the couloir — A resolve by everyone to be the first up — Morning preparation — Already ants mounting the avalanche cone by head lamp — I've put two socks on one foot and one on the other — Move out anyway — Time more important than symmetry — We don't rope up — The rocks whirl down the couloir barrel — Close calls already.

Despite the weight on our backs, we catch up with those in the couloir above. A large rock is dislodged by the lead, a German. There is a crunch nearby as a leg is broken in the second rope party, another German. We climb by on the *verglased* rock and ask to help — refused, for there are five to help the one. Sympathy is given to the groaning one, and off we go to our own brand of misery and joy. Royal's watch comes apart. Miraculously, we find all the pieces, and it still functions.

Huge rockfall from a party above on the grey ledges — 10 minutes lower and this would have been death — Anger — Shouts — Silence — Everyone, the whole international lot, contemplates the consequence of mistakes.

We catch up with a Scottish party on the hard part of the grey terraces, and then, onward to the start of the route. Royal asks to lead the first few pitches to my previous high point as I have already had the pleasure. He can have the pleasure. We gain altitude, and finally, yes finally, pass last year's high point. This seems like a gateway to success, as the Hinterstoisser had seemed on the Eiger.

We use a method of hauling our gear developed by Royal which, in my opinion, is revolutionary on this type of climb. Using jümars, carabiners and a sling, the packs are hauled all at once by an efficiency method using the leader's leg power. The second climbs simultaneously using jümars on the anchored climbing rope, taking out the pitons with no belay.

I lead up to the base of our second large barrier of overhangs. Royal takes over on 135-feet of continuous overhanging climbing somewhere between that which is called roof-like and that which is called very overhanging. We dub this lead the 'forty-meter overhang,' lacking further imagination.

Dusk comes while I depiton. Royal prepares some grade four with a delicate traverse. Then by head lamp, I lead up to what joyously is a really spacious ledge. We bivouac.

Morning — Shouts back and forth from the Magnone route* — Splashing of color from down jackets — A late, cold start.

Our route is fifty feet left of our ledge, and I must climb down and across to start up. I climb down taking out the pitons. When I start up, I push the free climbing hard, so as not to put in a piton until well above the bivouac ledge. This makes it easier on the second. Above, the ledge is rotten rock in an overhanging crack with guillotine flakes.

Tense, dangerous climbing — Perhaps one of the most dangerous rope-lengths of my career — Delicate work — Tied-off pitons — Successions of skyhook moves to avoid putting in pitons that would dislodge huge blocks and flakes — A foolish free move that leaves me nowhere — A skyhook, a little chrome-molly hook, that cannot possibly hold — It does — And, finally success and a belay ledge — Happiness is a belay ledge after a pitch like that.

The route looks easier above, but Royal finds it deceptively hard, and then, for Christ's sake, then comes the ordeal.

Royal hears a whir and shouts a warning. For me a sound, an impact, and white hot pain. Incredible pain that overwhelms, that seems to go to the core of one's being. My leg is paralyzed, and I'm certain that it is broken. A rock of unknown size having evidently fallen a very long distance, perhaps a thousand feet or more, has struck me on the thigh.

Royal waits on a piton while I try to drive order into the trauma of my mind and body. Luckily, I have muscular thighs, and this muscle has protected the bone; however, the stone has delivered a blow like a dum-dum bullet. (I later find out that the muscle and sciatic nerve have been extensively injured, for the interior of the leg bleeds and drains into the

*The original West Face route.

knee for nearly three months afterward.)

Not being able to fathom defeat after so much frustration on the face and needing time to think, I advise Royal to finish the lead. I still think the leg is broken, even when the time comes to prusik up and take out the pitons. In order to prusik, no matter how much you favor an injured leg, some straightening movements are necessary. In my weakness to the pain, I several times emotionally break down while going up those 135 feet. And never in all the injuries of a long athletic and military career, do I force myself so much. (I later learned from a neuro-surgeon that it was the trauma of such a blow to the trunk nerve that contributed to the general shock that I was having to fight.)

On the belay ledge, the top of several large, rotten flakes, Royal and I discuss the pros and cons of going on. Here is where, if Royal were not so eminently qualified for this kind of climbing, there would be but one decision — to go down. Leading for me for the remainder of the day and probably the next is out of the question. We decide to go on. Advising Elizabeth, Royal's wife, by radio, of our predicament and decision, we further suggest that someone come to the summit to help us down the back side. We predict a tough time getting down. Walking or easy climbing seem particularly difficult with this injury for less vertical rock means more reliance on leg strength. This commodity is decidedly absent.

The next lead goes around the corner to avoid a bad roof overhang. Royal is soon encountering the same trouble that I had, for huge sections of the rock move that ordinarily should be stable. There is no security. Royal rappels from halfway to take out some traverse pitons. This cuts down the distance that I will eventually pendulum, and I am grateful. He complains that this is probably his most dangerous lead in his career to date. Will it ease off? Hours go by with mutterings from above about loose blocks and flakes weighing many tons. As daylight fades, a small ledge is found, and the journey of pain is about to begin. First, the packs are to be hauled. When the hauling rope comes taut, I let the packs go, and out they swing, nearly twenty feet.

When one has deliberately to torture oneself by continuous and regular movement of an injury, there develops a curious sensuousness to the pain. One tends to analyse its dimension in different terms, from color to form. So up I move trying different ways of contracting and extending the torn muscle. About the only relief is the quality change of the pain varying from sharp spikes of accent to round deep rendering. White to red — Bach to Wagner — Cry to groan. Forty meters become a never-ending

journey into infinite variations on a single theme punctuated by the concentration of taking out pitons. Even the blows of the hammer and the feel of the rock take on sensual qualities, unpleasant except in academic reflection.

The ledge is reached and bivouac prepared, while just above us looms a specter. The largest overhang on the wall spreads its wings of shelter. A great roof, which for us humans looking up for our escape is a barrier of formidable proportions.

The night brings apprehension, while those ballerinas, hope and confidence, dance in the shadow of a stone roof. Our legs hang over the side, a bivouac position that never lets one doubt the spatial relationship of the situation. We are careful not to lose equipment to the void, and this takes concentration. Despite the tenuousness, there is satisfaction; and despite the leg, there is peace. The night is not unpleasant, and we do in fact feel the reward of our profession.

With dawn, our two ballerinas take center stage, and our great overhang betrays its weaknesses.

In fact, getting to the barrier is more of a problem, but knife-blades and skyhooks provide the answers until a gracefully curving jam crack leads Royal strenuously to the roof. The roof is split by a crack large enough to chimney though. Royal removes his helmet. Finally, our lion is tamed.

Thirst becomes an added discomfort, so the icicles that now appear are very welcome. Two pitches higher, we come to the second rock scar, which produces another friable section of the mountain. The usual afternoon mist has closed in, but we climb out of it into the sunshine that seldom warmed us below. This penetration from monochrome to brilliance is joy. From below, we hear a helicopter working its way up the wall for a look at the two feeble-minded ones. But, nearly to us, the pilot gives up and heads away for the security of space.

Several rope-lengths higher, we leave the rock scar by means of two illusive cracks around an airy corner. Then at our closest point to date to the Magnone route, we pounce on some more ice. We even take time out and on our small stance use the stove to make water.

Like two gargoyles, we watch an oddly if not shabbily clad figure work his way out of the depths parallel to us on the Magnone route.

Oblivious to our presence, he climbs in his own inner sanctum. How amusing it is to observe from our remote position. A man on a lead out of sight of everyone is incredibly private — I dare say more private than in his toilet. I was never so aware of this until we watched this man as

stone carvings must watch their counterparts. Finally, it is too much of a trespass, and we call to him.

Hearing voices from such an unlikely place, his surprise is pleasant to see. He speaks to his mate in a Slavic tongue. So they are Poles. Greetings are exchanged, and we watch as a pack is hauled up. An ice axe works its way out and hangs by a thread. We gesticulate wildly, but to no avail, as the pack is hauled on. Miraculously it stays, and we turn our attention to our own work.

We have had enough climbing for that day, so we leave a fixed rope and rappel down to a ledge below for the night.

Our ledge needs improvement, so the master engineers get to work with the loose blocks. Some snow is found and all that is necessary to make the mountaineer happy is provided: a mountain, a good ledge, snow for water and clear skies.

I am particularly happy, because my leg has improved so much during the day. I have hopes that by my massaging it tonight, I can lead tomorrow.

The importance of leading may seem odd to the layman, for obviously my leg will not be up to par, and therefore inefficient. However, there is an element of enjoyment and pride in leading that is of great personal importance. Many of the factors that make up the climber's *raison d'être* are found most strongly on the lead.

In the morning after an excellent night, we are ready to go for the summit. Thunderheads in the distance, though the weather report is good, give us added motivation.

I do in fact share leads having great fun on several, despite the impairment. The leg makes steady improvement.

The helicopter shows up and Royal takes pictures of the helicopter taking pictures. Later we find out that the journalist is annoyed, for picture after picture appears in the developer with climber taking picture of journalist. Despite this annoyance, a suitable photograph is run on the front page of the newspaper, while we are still on the mountain. The journalistic feat survives despite our apparent efforts of sabotage.

Finally, the West Face ends, and from our perch on the Bonatti Pillar, we see our friends coming up to meet us on the normal route.

The packs weigh us down, and we feel the lethargy of relaxed tension. We still must climb several rope-lengths of the Bonatti before we reach the quartz ledge where we can traverse to the descent. As I lead a short bit of artificial, my step sling breaks, but I catch myself on the lower piton.

We reach the ledge, traverse and start down. The mist closes in, and

it begins to rain. Obviously, we won't make it down today. We intercept two Swiss descending but take a different line for safety. Rappel after rappel brings us closer to the voices of our friends, Bev Clark and Lito Tejada-Flores. The Swiss and we simultaneously reach them just as the storm breaks in earnest, and the light fails.

I apologise for their wild goose chase since my leg has improved so much. However, we are all happy that I will not be a burden on the descent.

The electrical display begins with the rain turning to snow. Two French friends can be seen opposite on the Bonatti Pillar in a very unhappy position. We cram in three to a bivouac sack. Lightning hits nearby giving those of us leaning on the rock arm-numbing shocks. We soon realise that tomorrow our world will be transformed. The descent to safety will be very difficult. Royal has left his camera on the quartz ledge and is particularly depressed. Offers are made to go up tomorrow but are graciously turned down, due to the obvious jeopardy to life. When the lightning stops for good, I turn on the transistor radio and music warms the air both because of its nature and the incongruity with the situation. We all dread the descent.

The next day, it is still snowing furiously, and our mountain has a white, sliding, cold skin. The descent is slow and treacherous. I feel exhilaration and enjoy climbing down except for the drenching rappels. Finally, on the glacier, I feel like a dog tugging at a leash. I think to myself that it is wrong to feel so energetic.

Finally, with shouts and laughter, we do seat-glissades down the last slope to the hut, after an exceptionally dangerous descent.

Much to the consternation of loved ones, friends, television crews and journalists, we hole up in our new shelter for half that day, the night, and half the next day. Finally, a helicopter routs us out to the unfortunate world of rebukes, congratulations and misunderstandings.

What remains of these efforts? A line on a mountain? An adventure recalled? Photographs? They are all empty of life; no, there is nothing left, for even memory will fade. Today puts an end to yesterday, but tomorrow can only create from efforts of the past. That is what truly remains.

Summary of Statistics.

AREA: Western Alps, France, near Mont Blanc.

FIRST ASCENT: Direct ascent of the West Face of The Petit Dru, 12,248 feet, August 10-13, 1964.

PERSONNEL: John Harlin, Royal Robbins.