

# Blank Check

## A trip up the Eigernordwand, 69 years after the first ascent

Story and photos by Jonny Copp

*“Youth didn’t bother its head about the sharp tongues of the wordy warfare that flared up after the first tragedy on the Eiger’s face. It only heard in the mountain’s threats a siren call, a challenge to its own courage. It even invented the pious untruth that it was its own duty to fulfill the bequest of the men who had died. Perhaps it even believed it. But the real spur was that inexplicable longing for the eternal adventure.”*

—Heinrich Harrer, 1959

Steve Su enjoying the Eigernordwand’s only 10 minutes of direct sunshine as he traverses just below the Waterfall pitch, 4,000 feet up the wall.





Su clawing and stemming up the Brittle Crack (M-who-knows), access to the Traverse of the Gods. A few old pins smashed deep into the fissure protect the pitch.

**T**he express train from Interlaken weaves and tunnels through the flying buttresses and dark forests of the Alps. Steve Su and I take coffee in small, strong shots in the caboose café. We roll into Grindelwald with exactly three days to spare, trundling our duffles onto the open-air platform, jumping out, and looking up. There it is, the 6,000-foot North Face of the Eiger. Just like in the movies: Clint Eastwood up there with his mind-blowing one-liners and his license to kill. Just like in the books: climbers plying their skills and dying to be the first up the biggest, baddest face in Europe. In 1938, a tough team comprised of Andreas Heckmair, Ludwig Vörg, Heinrich Harrer, and Fritz Kasperek made it up the Eigernordwand after a decade of attempts by Europe's finest. So many have died on the face, you don't know how to begin to count.

The hustle and frantic flow of ski season has subsided. Grindelwald is slowing down for its typically mellow spring. The pastry and souvenir shops close early, and some don't open at all. There are more cows with big bells on their necks roaming the hillsides than people sliding down them. Nights are cold. Days are just warm enough to climb gloveless in the sun. But the nordwand lives in eternal shadow.

We came here because we had to. Circumstance brought us close — Steve was in Spain, and I had been commissioned to shoot photos of a ski traverse of the Swiss Alps. And if you're a climber, the Eiger carries a magnetism that is impossible to ignore. We were in its vicinity and drawn to its flame. Eigernordwand is the historic embodiment of the "longing for the eternal adventure." We are fortunate pilgrims at its feet.

We also want to climb it before it rots away. Global warming

is causing the face and some of its main features to crumble, making the notoriously dangerous wall even more treacherous. Dense storms sneak up on the mountain without warning, leaving everything coated in rime. But the main objective hazards today are stonefall and loose rock.

Ice that has bonded the rock together is quickly melting. This is one reason we've decided to climb it in winter conditions, but the changing face of the Eiger is still obvious. (We aren't planning on dying on the wall. After surviving an avalanche two months earlier on Anvil Mountain, in southern Colorado, I'm over dying.) Steve and his wife, Catherine, had a son less than a year ago. He's fired up to come back in one piece, too. So we check in with the Swiss Mountain Rescue about conditions. As we enter the spotless office within the town's official Sports Facility, a one-eyed man, clearly a climber, greets us. *Should we try it?* we

politely ask him.

"Absolutely not," he says in a wonderfully wobbling Swiss-German accent. "The fresh snow from the storm three days ago will be a problem to find gear in the rock and for wet slides. I think better maybe to climb some smaller rocks in the sun?"

**A** day later we're on the face, with three quiches from the lovely baker lady's shop and some Swiss chocolate. It's all snow and ice and limestone as far as we can see, but it feels different. It feels alive, as if those who have died here left something of themselves. As the lower thousand feet gives way to steeper terrain and more rock, the layered limestone seems to slope off the wrong way, leaving few positive features. We find old pitons bent over and smashed to a pulp, and we clip them, because there is little else. More so than any protection we place, we trust in our climbing. Balancing, camming the ice picks, pulling, reaching, finding the best solution to the individual moves and the big-picture decisions at the same time, and moving on without looking back or down... except for fun. What appeared to be small pillars from below now loom like oil tankers on end. Overlaps have grown into arching roofs that our heels hang over. Crumbling rock and ice fall silently below.

At 5 p.m., we share a few laughs with three Italian alpinists high on the face, the only other people we've seen. They ask us to fix a rope for them up a steep rock corner. We do, and then move on. We won't see the climbers again on the wall.

Just before dusk, sunlight almost touches the North Face. I reach out from the wall and dip my fingers into it like it's honey. I try to savor those final rays, but the anxiousness that often precedes darkness on a big, unknown route corrupts the moment. Since

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we are trying to "onsight" this route in a single push, we have no bivouac gear. We do know the legends, however, and the names: the Hinterstoisser Traverse, where Toni Kurtz died; the confusing Exit Cracks; the Death Bivouac, where Karl Mehringer and Max Sedlmeyer were killed; and the crux Ice Hose.

We are strung out across the crumbling Traverse of the Gods as the valley, and then the peaks, slip into darkness. The world becomes small, private, and surreal. The job is to react. And in action, anxiety disappears. My headlamp beam exposes an ever-changing display of vertical terrain, from the subtleties of snow, névé, and ice, to rock dihedrals and delicate face holds. Look down, place a crampon point on an edge, and then forget about it until it needs to move again.

We simul-climb through the White Spider, the infamous, branched ice feature visible from dozens of miles away, and stem into more rock towers. It's getting cold. Just when we wonder if we are lost, two lights ignite on a sloping ledge a few hundred feet above. Humans. Unless they are lost, we are on the right track.

**S**teve is leading when we encounter the light source: two Frenchmen who have been on the face for three days. I'm belaying, stuffed in an icy chimney below, but can clearly hear one of the Frenchmen. I can even see his cigarette bobbing in the dark while he gestures wildly at Steve.

"You must not continue!" yells the French climber. "Go down to your partner now and stay for zee night! If you try for zis in zee night, you will die! *DO YOU LISTEN TO ME?!*"

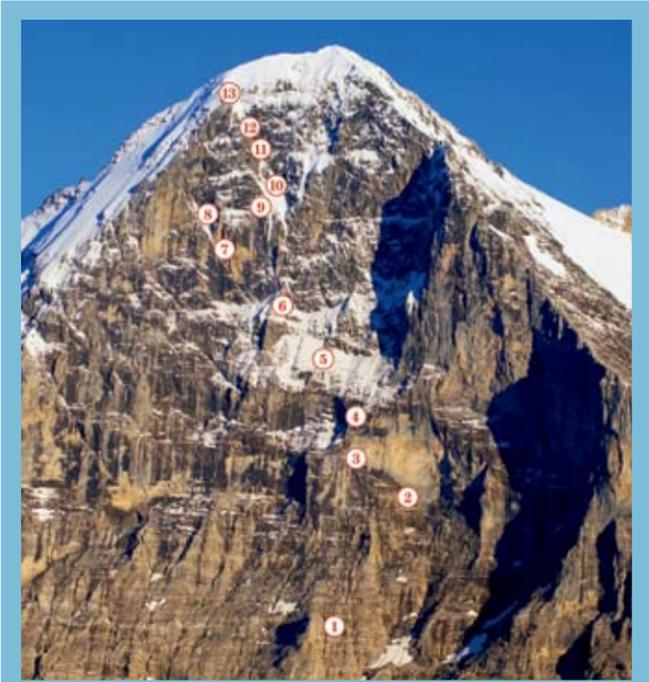
Steve is quiet, considerate, and climbs hard. He is a man of few words, and for this conversation he has even fewer. "Uhhhhhm, well, we climb in the night quite a bit," he says.

We pass the French with little understanding of one another. There are no more loud words, but I believe something has been lost in translation. As I climb by the men in their puffy sleeping bags, I wish them good luck. A few minutes later I hear it reciprocated: an authentic "*Bon Voyage!*" echoes from below.

The Exit Cracks do hold some tricky climbing, with unconsolidated snow on rock. And we do get off route another time or two. Our topo is basically a red line drawn on a photo. But as sunlight bleeds into early morning clouds, I look down the final corner of snow, ice, and rock, and yell to Steve that we're home free.

We kick and step up the corniced summit ridge, and then sit for a bit on the unmarred snow cone, with no higher to go. There is no sign or mark of man here, as if the Earth signs a blank check for each traveler. Our footprints, too, will blow away soon. And that blank check will be here for the next climber who sees potential value in the nothingness of our pursuit. We laugh lots and then plunge-step 6,000 feet down the West Face.

*Johnny Copp and Micah Dash just returned from India, where they FA-blitzed the Colorado Route (VI 5.11 A1 M6), on the 19,200-foot Shafat Fortress. See our next issue, No. 263, for a feature story on their climb.*



## Eiger To Go:

Jonny Copp takes you up the Nordwand

- ① **First Pillar:** A 500-foot crumbling tower used as the first major landmark while approaching the face. It's dark and we don't know where the hell we are.
- ② **Difficult Crack:** A 150-foot, steep, flaring crack. I'm trying to free-climb everything, not knowing that everyone aids (or French-frees) this stuff. My ice tool pops out of a pin scar, and the hammer hits me square in the eyeball. Blood drips onto the ice.
- ③ **Hinterstoisser Traverse:** A 150-foot, left-leaning, sloping, traverse above huge roofs. We stare across at a hanging mess of fixed lines and hardware, some new, some ancient. We half-expect to see a body mummified within.
- ④ **Ice Hose:** Water-ice runnel and névé connecting the First and Second snowfields. An "ice hose" should have way more ice.
- ⑤ **Second Snowfield:** Snow and ice, four pitches long at circa 55 degrees. We simul-climb 700 feet sideways, not up.
- ⑥ **Death Bivouac:** A chiseled snow shelf sheltered by overhanging rock. Eerie. Someone has been sleeping in this bed. Steve and I try to guess who.
- ⑦ **Waterfall Pitch:** No water or ice here this time — only 70 feet of steep rock. Three Italian alpinists we meet here ask us to fix their line up the corner. We wonder if they have fresh espresso in a Thermos, though we don't ask.
- ⑧ **Brittle Crack:** Vertical choss with a crack through it. The "Brittle Crack" is more difficult than the "Difficult Crack," especially if you're a "stupid American" who tries to "free-climb" everything.
- ⑨ **Traverse of the Gods:** Approximately four pitches on a horribly rotten window-ledge traverse. We simul-climb (sideways, again, not up), clipping a few old pitons along the way.
- ⑩ **White Spider:** A 600-foot-tall, branched ice field that gave the title to Heinrich Harrer's famous book. "Arachnophilia!" Fat ice and névé, and we are going *up* fast. But it's getting dark.
- ⑪ **Exit Cracks:** Approximately six pitches of confusing, but solid limestone dihedrals. "We're off route again, I think," yells Steve. "Jonny, can you hear me!?"
- ⑫ **Conti Bivouac:** The top of a broken pillar, big enough for two people. We have our little international conflict.
- ⑬ **More Exit Cracks:** "I think we're off route Steve!," I yell down. "Steve, can you hear me!?"

—JC