

FIELD REPORT

# Les Droites

by Jonathan Copp

It is 2 a.m. in the deep cold of winter's night on the north face of a mountain called Les Droites. By the moonlight we can just see the Argentiere Glacier rolling blue thousands of feet below and spanning into darkness. The candle-lit Savoyards and brimming pubs of Chamonix warm the bellies of late night patrons only a few miles away. I can still taste the meaty gravy of a shepherd's pie from a night ago. And it seems that we can almost hear the clamor, clanking and white noise of those places down in the valley – those places where we spoke nonchalantly, just yesterday, about climbing here with only daypacks and smiles. This proximity is both comforting and painful when sleep, food and drink are not on the night's menu.

The face of Les Droites is a frozen maze of ice runnels connecting grooves to corners, sometimes only to end at a blank headwall. When we left the comfort of the glacier 20 hours earlier, we figured this would be a solid day climb. But a wrong turn 12 hours ago has led us into an endless series of stalermates and dead-ends, including the last runnel which ended again at an overhanging impasse. Now, still lost in the middle of the night with no bivy gear, things are becoming mildly serious.


An unhindered rope dangles from my waist, extending to my partners below. My left leg is straight, taking most of the

weight, with front points in the ice. My right shoulder is pressed against the cold granite wall, and my left arm is hanging high on a fair ice-axe placement. Moments earlier I was entombed in animal fear when, with calves burning and eyes zeroing in on the next piece of protection, the batteries in my headlamp died. Slowly, I bite one glove off for the braille work of a blind stopper placement. The only other batteries I have are in the camera at the bottom of my pack.

*Hang. Breathe. Feel for the positive, nipple sides of the batteries. Don't drop them ...*

I chisel ice out of a crack, set an anchor, and lean back with my newly functioning headlamp only to stare up at a blunt darkness. From below, moonlight shadows had convinced us that this was finally the way onto easier ground, a way out. But once again we've stumbled upon a dead end. As Kelly and Brent stretch for and clip into the belay, I notice a hell-bent look in their eyes, like smoldering embers, when they realize we are at another dead end. What we don't know is that the next pitch would again get us nowhere, and that the real suffering had only just begun.

Les Droites. All within a day: From a fiery confidence to just a will for survival and comfort – mimicking maybe what old age brings many and what hard times do to most.



**Jonathan Copp**, founder of the Boulder Adventure Film Festival, specializes in putting himself and his partners at risk by tackling imposing routes while simultaneously looking for the perfect photo. He is still on the search, armed and dangerous.