



VOLUNTEER WALL

IV 5.10 A4-, 700' CARTWRIGHT-
ILGNER-WHITTEMORE, 1985;
EPA, 5.12a ILGNER-ILGNER, 1990

FIRST ASCENT

WHITESIDES, BLUE RIDGE MOUNTAINS, NORTH CAROLINA | ARNO ILGNER

THE DREAM of “becoming somebody” is really a shallow way of looking at life: it makes you focus on how different you are from others, a preoccupation that usually translates into figuring out how you are more important. Sometimes what it takes to wake up and find your real place in the world is a precisely timed slap.

When I was in high school in Middle Tennessee, some friends took me to a forty-foot limestone cliff along the Duck River. We nailed pins into cracks and occasionally into the soft rock itself; then we hung on them and looked around for more protection. At home, I read all the climbing books I could find—*The Great Days* by Walter Bonatti, *The Seventh Grade* by Reinhold Messner, *I Chose to Climb*

by Chris Bonington—and I imagined myself performing great deeds as they had done.

After college, I moved out West to work in a Wyoming oil patch and to hone my climbing skills at places like Devils Tower and Yosemite. When the oil patch dried up, I took odd jobs. In 1984, at age thirty, with no clear path, I moved back to Tennessee. I remembered Whitesides, a 700-foot wall in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, and I thought it might help me “become somebody” in the climbing world.

During storms, water runs down the lower-angle right-hand side of this cliff, causing the lichen to grow into huge, green, curling leaves. The sun then dries them into a gray mass that

hides the holds. But the left-hand side has an overhanging headwall. Here, the rain cascades through the air and hits the slabs far below. No moisture; no lichen. Thus, the middle section contains a large white, barren spot—the namesake of Whitesides.

North Carolina climbers made the initial first ascents on the right, weaving their way through licheny slabs. It's not easy to find protection: the gneiss is practically devoid of cracks. The crystals and small edges sometimes break. I'd heard stories of leaders securing their belays by bracing themselves on moss hummocks. Whitesides soon became known as a place for death routes. The North Carolinians who had the mental fortitude to climb them

would look over toward the Headwall and simply say, "It's impregnable." They figured that if the right side was already dangerous and difficult, the steeper left side would be too dangerous and too difficult.

I decided that North Carolina climbers were pansies. I was a real man from Tennessee, and I would impregnate their virgin wall. All the way back to Davy Crockett and the Alamo, Tennesseans volunteered to fight impossible battles, hence the nickname "Volunteer State." I hadn't done any of the right-side routes, but how hard could that Headwall be? If it required a mind of steel, I would summon it. After some runout first ascents in Wyoming and big walls in Yosemite, I already had a reputation for being able to deal with fear.

FOR MY TEAM, I recruited two Nashville locals who had done only a little climbing: Mark Cartwright and Eddie Whittemore. The gap in our experience meant that leadership would default to me—insuring that I retained most of the glory. On May 18, 1985, we packed two haul sacks for a three-day attack. We hiked to the top of the cliff, where cavers had established a rappel station to practice their ascending systems. There, we rigged a 700-foot static rope for our descent.

Steep, lichen-covered slabs led from the base of the wall to a vertical dihedral. Above that point, the wall turned white and reared back, disappearing into the clouds. On the first day, I felt in my element, scraping away the annoying lichen to find holds. To save time, I ran it out instead of drilling. There was something satisfying about creating a route too scary for others to do. After four pitches, we were halfway up the wall.

One more day, I thought. And we'll bag the first ascent right from under the North Carolinians' noses. We rappelled two pitches to bivy on Register Ledge. Before turning in, we planned our strategy. Mark would take Pitch 5, while Eddie and I belayed and hauled. I thought about what it would be like to haul those two heavy sacks: *I should get rid of any extra weight. We don't really need this much water if we'll be off tomorrow.* I dumped it all out except for two quarts.

The next day, however, it took until 11

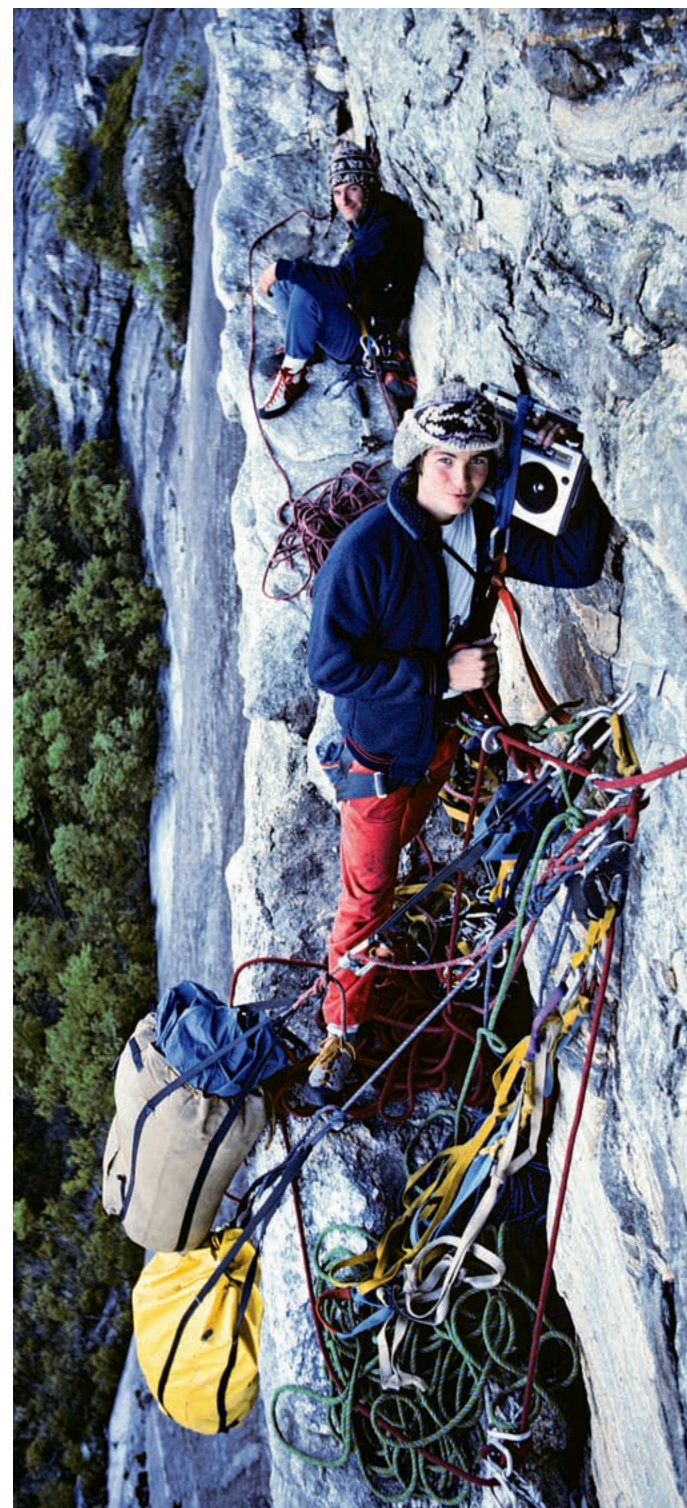
a.m. to get everything to our high-point. Beyond it, the rock became rich with mica, and it was nerve-wracking to hook some of the friable edges. At last, some large sections of stronger quartz and white feldspar appeared. We had entered the white spot.

A six-foot roof barred entry to the sweeping Headwall. We perched on a ledge that I called "Highmen," a play on words with the female anatomy. Although it was now early evening, we had to make a little more progress. I aided up to the roof on Tri-Cams and hooks, and I reached around the lip to a large horn. I hooked it and swung my weight out, dangling over 500 feet of emptiness. Two incipient short cracks emerged through the fading light. I made some hook moves to reach them and placed two copperheads.

Each effort upward put me over even more emptiness. Mark and Eddie created these copperheads in their garage. *How strong are they?* I didn't have a headlamp, and I didn't want to keep going, but I was the leader, and my partners relied on me. For the first time, I began to doubt whether I could actually live up to that trust. I did some more hook moves, and the edges disappeared. Above, the wall looked blank, steep and dark. I drilled a bolt and lowered back to the security of the ledge.

The hardest climbing was still ahead. *How could I have been so sure that we'd finish in two days?* I felt as if someone had slapped me, and the sting persisted in the night air. The cold peanut-butter sandwiches stuck in my throat. I sipped droplets from our remaining water to wash them down. *Did I really have that mental strength that others said I did?*

Eddie and Mark got into their bags on either side of me. I crawled into mine, sat upright on the ledge and dangled my legs into space. *Highmen, impregnable, to be somebody, am I mentally tough?* Words and thoughts streamed through my head as I gave way to a fitful sleep.



In the morning, Mark rummaged through the food sack looking for breakfast and pulled out oatmeal packets. I knew we didn't have enough water left to cook, so I quickly emptied

[Facing Page] Arno Ilgner climbs the insecure slopers of Pitch 8 on the Volunteer Wall (IV 5.12), twenty-five years after he made the first ascent. Scott Perkins | [This Page] Mark Cartwright holds a boom box in 1985, imitating the photo of Randy Leavitt on El Cap.

Behind him, Eddie Whittemore sits on "Highmen," the main bivy ledge of Volunteer Wall. "The name was a play on words," the author explains. "It represented the last comfortable point before breaking through to the most difficult part." Arno Ilgner

a packet into my mouth. Mark and Eddie looked at me as if I'd gone crazy. I laughed, puffing oatmeal flakes into the air.

Eddie put a Van Halen tape into his cassette player to get us going. The doubts of the previous night dissipated. I juggled to our highpoint and drilled another bolt. The hard, white feldspar created crisp edges excellent for free climbing, but I couldn't find any places for nuts or cams, so I hammered in homemade copperheads wherever I could, and I hung on them while I looked for more protection above. Once I located it, I committed to free climbing to the next point—just as I had as a teenager along the Duck River, so many years ago.

The angle of the rock finally decreased, and the lichen returned. As I brushed it off, fragments of gray danced and swirled in the wind around my head and landed in my eyes. By now, my fingers looked as though I'd run them through a briar patch. My lips and throat were parched. Since I couldn't decide how to get through the next bulges, I just picked a belay spot, dangled from two hooks and prepared to drill.

We were only a hundred feet from the top; I was going to make my mark in climbing. In a split second, the hooks skated off the edges. I fell past vertical rock and my last placement: a lousy copperhead. The wall steepened, and I was surrounded by nothing but air. After fifty or sixty feet, I came to a stop just above the roof. I spun about in space. Another slap. *Just as I start to feel confident, I get knocked down.* Van Halen was still playing, "Might as well jump...." *Well, I know what we're calling this pitch.*

My aiders, unsecured, continued drifting past Mark and Eddie to the bottom of the wall. It was early afternoon, the air was hot, we had less than one quart of water left, and I had no idea what to do.

Fortunately, some climbers (most likely North Carolinians) happened to be walking along the base, and they agreed to tie the aiders to the end of the caver rappel line that hung close to us. I worked my way back up to my highpoint, moving cautiously and resting often. This time I climbed toward the line of weakness



[Photo] While revisiting his route in 2010, Ilgner fell, and the copperheads ripped. After a fifty-plus-foot whipper, he came to a stop, holding the blown gear. Scott Perkins

before I drilled a belay. I pulled up 600 feet of rope to retrieve the aiders.

When Mark and Eddie arrived at the anchor, they appeared shell-shocked. I realized they'd agreed to come along out of naiveté. And there we were: the three of us and two haul sacks hanging from two crappy quarter-inch bolts, while they waited for me to lead them off this wall. As I traversed across the last difficult pitch, I looked over to my wide-eyed companions and tried to joke. "You know, some people might consider this a little bit dangerous." They didn't seem to find my comment funny.

Mark and Eddie led a couple of easier pitches, and we pulled ourselves over the top. Despite our mishaps, I was beginning to feel as if I'd made a step in Bonington's direction. We'd name our line the "Volunteer Wall"—a sign that Tennesseans could still show North Carolinians what was possible.

MY NEXT GOAL WAS to free climb the route, but for the next five years, that six-foot roof had it in for me. Once, after I committed to the moves, I fell and slammed into Highmen Ledge. That impact hurt more than a slap.

Over time, I let go of the idea of "becoming somebody." My brother Mark and I finally freed the Volunteer Wall in 1990. By then, people were free climbing The Salathé in Yosemite. Whitesides' Headwall didn't seem so groundbreaking anymore. I was always a step behind what others were accomplishing anyway. I just accepted it.

It took another ten years for me to understand that climbing was about more than first ascents. Bonington hadn't set out to be an important figure: his great deeds were merely a result of doing what he loved. The people who instructed new climbers and who worked to preserve access contributed in their own way. Each was part of a whole.

I turned forty. I was still working in dissatisfying jobs, and my life felt superficial and meaningless. I realized I wasn't any better than the North Carolina climbers. What had helped me—and what had hindered them—was not skill

or experience, but something about my mind. Because I hadn't climbed those right-side routes, I didn't have any preconceived ideas about the danger of the left side. In reality, the steepness of the Headwall made the falls safer. The holds were bigger because they weren't exposed to as much weathering.

It was thus that I finally made my choice: to create a life's work in the sport I loved, teaching mental fitness to climbers. Recently, I talked with Mark and Eddie again. They told me that when they started to make first ascents themselves, they applied a lesson they'd learned from the Volunteer Wall: "Just go and deal with whatever comes up." Long before I realized my vocation, in my own way, I'd been a teacher.

What I remember most, now, though, is pulling through the six-foot roof during the first free ascent with my brother. I had to stop and look around. What a glorious position to be in: I was hanging my ass above 500 feet of air, and I didn't feel any fear or any need to hurry on. I just felt that I was a part of my surroundings. The sun warmed me, the wind cooled me, and as I gently gripped the holds, I looked down at the lichen-covered slabs far below, and I yelled, "This is awesome," as loud as I could. ■