

First Ascents in the Mont Blanc Alps

JOHN HARLIN

L'Aiguille du Fou's South Face

IT HAD been three hours since the first wisps of high cirrus appeared from the west. The sky was now overcast and lowering. The summits of the Jorasses were put to sleep, and the woolly mass of cloud was getting blacker. Konrad began to rappel, and just as he touched the snow beside me a rumble sounded in the couloir between the Lépiney and Fou. Looking up, we caught sight of a mass of falling ice and rock. It struck above our heads, showering over us in an arch and roared down the 300 meters of snow below, setting off smaller avalanches on the way. I whistled with relief. After a pause for nerve, we set off down the couloir, the backs of our necks prickling and our ears straining for the return of that feared sound. Thus ended our first futile attempt on the Fou's south face. It was made by Konrad Kirch and myself in the early summer of 1963.

Since 1952 there had been a number of attempts to force a way up the face, made by climbers of high reputation from many countries. The attacks concentrated on a great diagonal crack that traverses the face ascending from right to left. Two rope-lengths was the greatest distance made. Large quantities of *coins de bois* (wooden wedges) had been employed, those poor substitutes for the impressive aluminum or chrome-molybdenum pitons of the Yosemite.

Later in the summer of 1963 Tom Frost, Gary Hemming, Stewart Fulton and I gathered for another try. We waited and waited for good weather. Finally in desperation Stewart and I set off in doubtful conditions for another reconnaissance. In the upper couloir we found rock pitches of IV and V completely covered with snow, loose snow. By afternoon we had turned the huge barrier overhang at the bottom of the face proper with a strenuous pitch of VI. Because the extension of the route was questionable, we turned back as it began to rain. As we descended, I noted a thin crack system that led up and over the overhang directly, extending into what appeared to be a more feasible route above.

In the middle of July Gary, Stewart, Tom and I approached the bergschrund for yet another try. High cirrus and other ominous signs nearly caused us to turn back, but at last I was so busy climbing the ice

wall of the slightly overhanging schrund that I forgot the troublesome weather. Our headlamps glowed and caused weird dancing reflections as we steadily gained altitude in the couloir. For security and speed I attached a fixed rope to a second ice axe at the top of every lead. Finally we were all standing in the early morning sun on a good but airy ledge just below the great figure-seven barrier-overhang that blocks the bottom of the face. Tom, our artificial-climbing expert from Yosemite, took the lead. He carried a beautiful selection of American pitons designed for the most difficult granite crack systems. These pitons embody a completely different principle. Made from tough chrome-molybdenum steel, instead of conforming to a crack by bending and deforming, they conform the way a spring acts. When the piton is extracted, it regains its original shape and can be used several hundred times. The strength of the steel allows practical pitons of razor-thinness to be constructed.

Tom was soon so far out under the overhang that his hauling rope hung like a plumb line far out from the face. We finally could pull our sack up. Ten meters separated the vertical hauling line from the face below the overhang. Rarely does one find a granite overhang of such proportions. (This lead took 26 pitons! — *Editor.*)

Above the overhang Gary took the lead. Mixed artificial and free climbing brought us to the great diagonal crack on the route of all previous attempts. We had avoided taking this crack from the bottom because it did not climb the south face directly and was a way of getting around the lower third of the face we had just climbed. Quantities of *coins de bois* had been left in the crack from previous attempts.

Darkness dictated a bivouac. A light rain started with not too distant thunder and lightning. Since Stewart and I had only a ledge approximately ten centimeters wide, we rigged a bivouac hammock to two rather awkwardly spaced pitons. When we got in, it broke and we fell through. This left us to spend the night in *étriers*, and a miserable night it was. In the morning we rappelled in rain down the diagonal crack, leaving fixed ropes and a quantity of equipment.

On still another attempt, although rain came as we were finishing the prusik up our fixed ropes in the diagonal crack, we decided to push the route further. The diagonal is difficult free climbing with little protection. Stewart, laybacking in the crack just below the large overhang that divides the diagonal, slipped and arched down hard on the one good piton he had managed to place. The rain and a bruised hand dictated a retreat.

The sky was aflame with signs of bad weather as we made the approach for our final and successful attempt on July 25. Tom and Stewart had gone up the evening before with Dorene Del Fium and had bivouacked

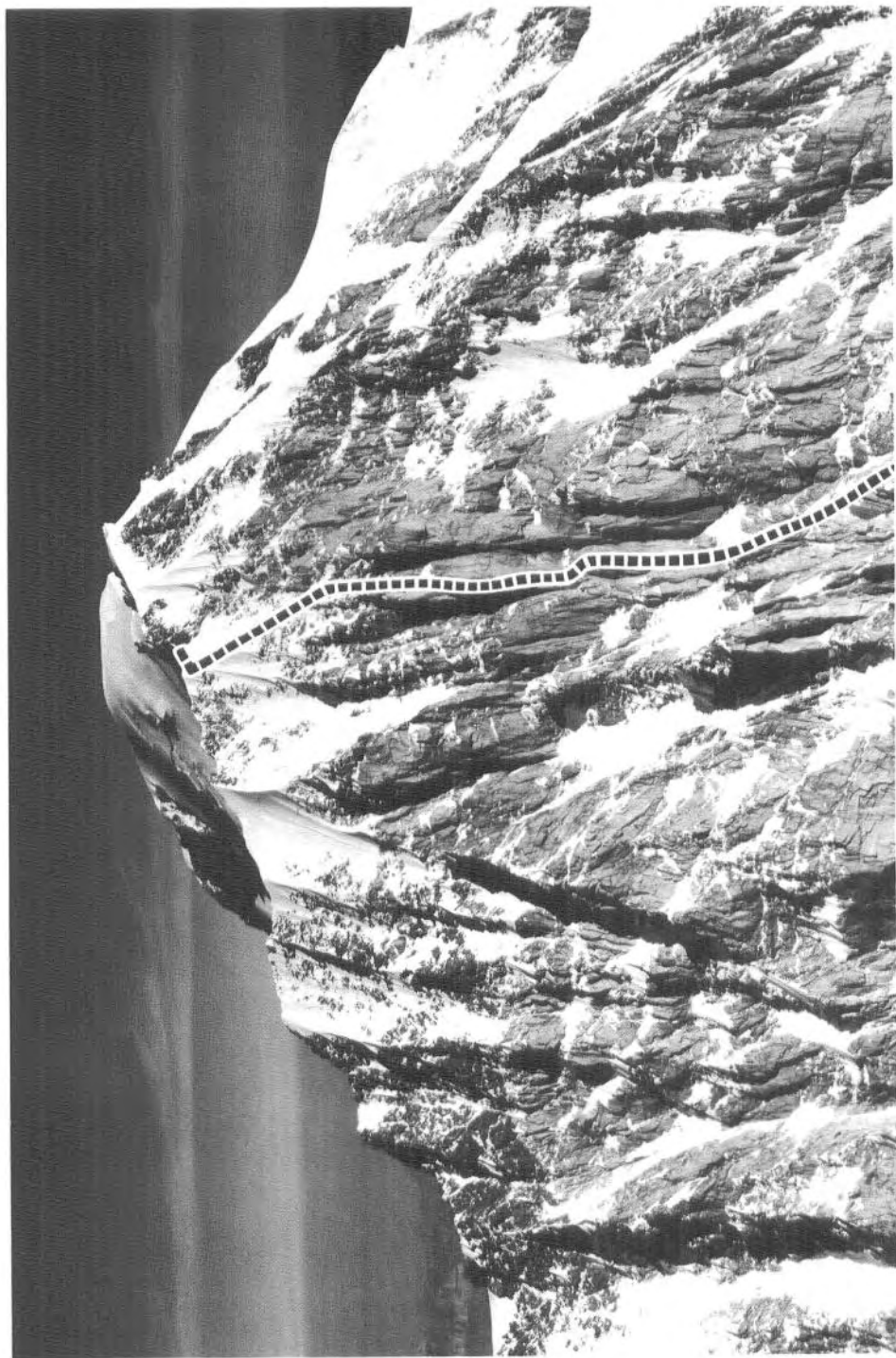


Photo by Bradford W. Atbourn

ITALIAN FACE OF MONT BLANC. Hidden Pillar of Fréney is marked.

PLATE 65



PLATE 66

New route on AIGUILLE DU FOU.

Photo by Bradford Waiburn

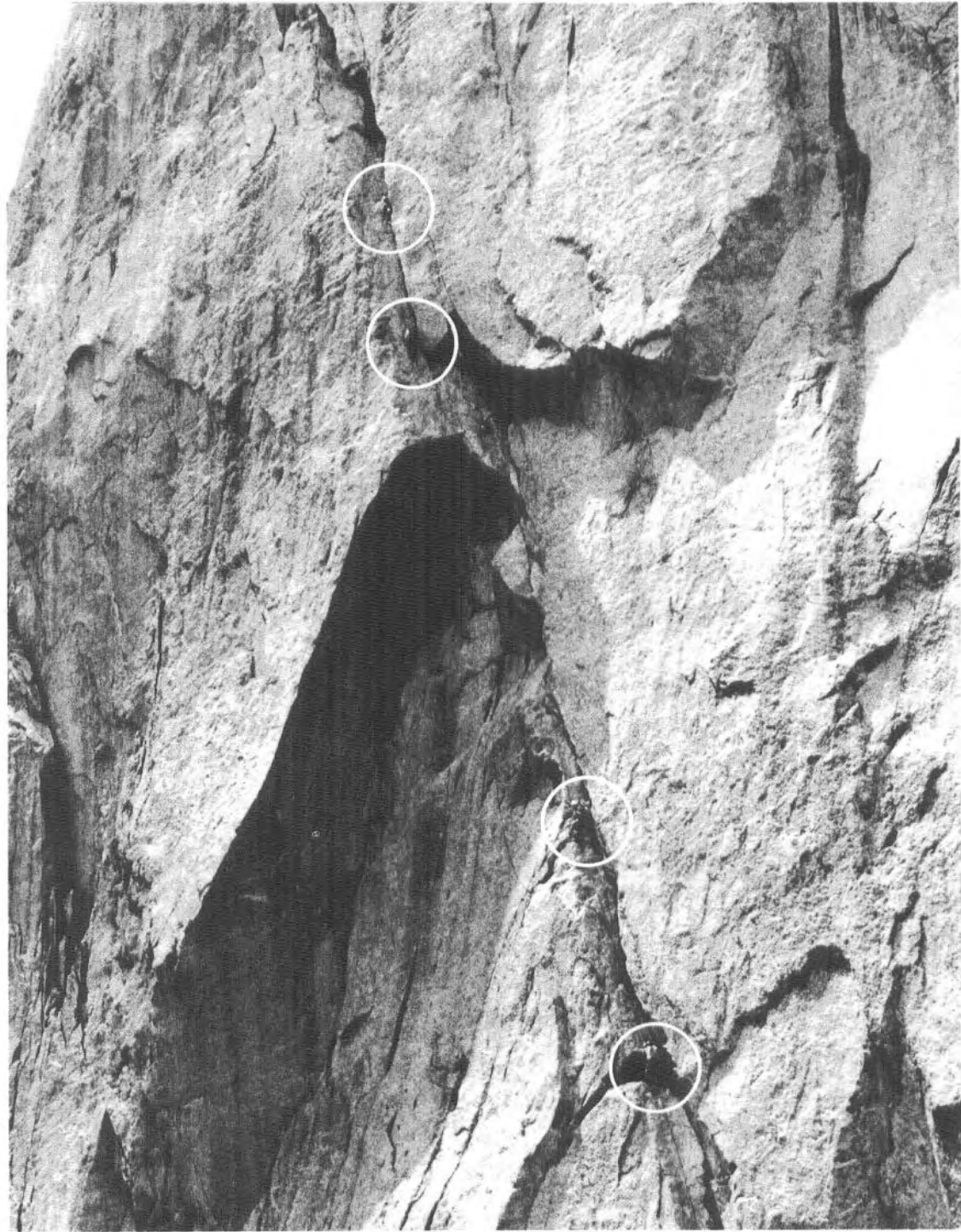


PLATE 67

Photo by Dorene Del Fium

Entire team in diagonal crack midway up face of AIGUILLE DU FOU.

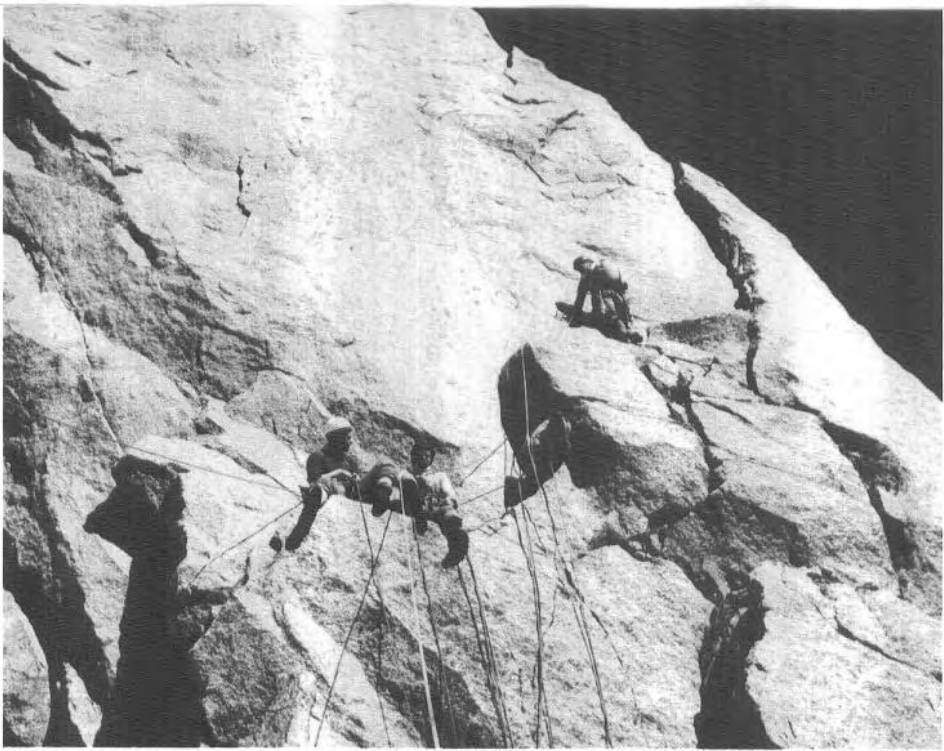


PLATE 68

Below the Grand Dièdre on the lower portion of the FOU.

PLATE 69

Photos by Thomas Frost

Stewart Fulton completing difficult layback in Diagonal Crack.





PLATE 70

Stewart Fulton surveys the questionable, wide portion of Diagonal Crack above the roof.

PLATE 71 *Photos by Thomas Frost*

John Harlin atop the AIGUILLE DU FOU.



below the face. Gary and I left in the morning with Claude Guerre-Genton and Mara, my wife, and climbed the classical southeast ridge of the Blaitière as an approach. As we passed the first conspicuous pinnacle on this route, we could see Tom and Stewart getting off to a late start. At the bivouac spot we left the girls to bivouac and follow our progress from the *breche* cornice. When Gary and I started our prusik, Tom had already turned a sickle overhang in the diagonal and was working on the wider crack above. Stewart had previously laybacked up to a stance below the overhang. This represented a truly fine piece of work and will no doubt be a rigorous test for subsequent climbing parties. On the overhang itself Tom had managed a spectacular bit of engineering by using our very smallest two-centimeter piton and then our largest, a four-inch bong-bong, two meters higher. Above this was a series of five *coins de bois* spliced or put together with large aluminum angle-pitons. Tom would stand off balance on tip toes on previously placed *coins de bois* and aluminum piton and place the next piton at arm's length above. From a bad belay in slings, Tom set off again on extremely difficult artificial climbing, using knife-blade pitons to negotiate a conspicuously black overhang that barred the way to what hopefully would be our bivouac ledge. (This 150-foot pitch required 28 pitons. — *Editor.*)

When Tom arrived at the ledge, the joy in his voice told us that the ledge would be satisfactory, if not comfortable. Gary and I prusiked up a fixed line with the material for the bivouac while Stewart depitoned what is probably the most difficult artificial lead in the western Alps. As soon as I reached the ledge, I started climbing the crack above the bivouac to prepare for the next day. Darkness caused me to rappel finally, and as my feet touched the ledge, the sky tore open and a storm broke. Before we could get into our bivouac sacks, the hail and rain had soaked us. Lightning was all about, striking the Fou and lacing the darkness with incandescent whiteness. This storm was of extreme violence; it turned out to be one of the hardest of the summer. In our sacks we ate and drank, marveling at the electrical display and wondering if the next flash would be marked for us. I discovered another unhappy fact. Our large canteen had leaked onto all my dry clothes and so there was no hope for a comfortable night.

In the morning an opaque grayness of cloud greeted our reveille. Gary quickly finished my lead of the night before. As I again took the lead, the clouds began to break, and one could catch glimpses of the fantastic landscape of soaring rock and ice to right and left. In placing pitons and in stretching for infrequent holds on that great smooth wall, life effervesced within me. I stole glances at the scene around me and caught sight

of footprints over on the ice ridge near the Lépiney. Finally after running out the fifty-meter rope, I still had about six meters of free climbing to go to reach the belay and so I waited for Gary to move to give me the additional rope. The time afforded me a chance to study even more this beautiful, ethereal world as the clouds tore around us letting in the sun in occasional brilliant shafts.

At last I had to move again, for the belay had been readjusted. At a stance, far worse than I had predicted from below, I fixed the prusik line, and Tom started up snapping pictures as he came. Gary depitoned. Gary then completed the overhang overhead and, above, found that the route eased off in difficulty but increased in magnificence. Two pitches of V turned out to be some of the most enjoyable free climbing any of us had ever done.

We at last pulled ourselves onto the summit slabs. Here the summit of the Fou floated in the clouds and the towering cumulus all around at our level reminded me of many similar moments while flying. However, here one could actually feel the elements and be part of them. These sculptured forms, ever-changing like life itself, made mockery of our Fou. The south face of the Fou, perhaps the hardest climb in the western Alps, yet it could not compare to a soaring cliff of vapor with cracks and chimneys of translucent crystals never to feel a human hand.

The Hidden Pillar of Frêne

(Editor's Note: John Harlin and Tom Frost were the American representatives at the Rassemblement International in Chamonix. As a part of this program, on August 1 and 2, they made the first ascent of the Hidden Pillar of Frêne (Pilier Derobé du Frêne) on the Italian side of Mont Blanc. This western pillar lies just to the left of the Central Pillar. The route description by Harlin follows.)

Route description: The approach to the Hidden Pillar from the Gamba hut is by way of the Col d'Inominatta, Frêne glaciers, Rocher Gruber, Col de Peuterey, Plateau Superior de Frêne and finally a diagonal couloir descending from the foot of the pillar passing under the Central Pillar to the bergschrund above the Plateau Superior. An alternate approach is from the Col de Forche and North Face of the Col de Peuterey. Either way one should plan on at least 10 hours, or considerably more if conditions are bad, before starting the climb of the pillar. This approach is one of the longest, most interesting and dangerous in the Alps. It should not be underestimated and constitutes a long and difficult climb in itself.

At the foot of the pillar take a vertical crack at the left hand edge, climbing jam cracks and laybacks to a good stance. From here the difficulty increases but the rock is of exceptionally good quality, permitting strenuous free climbing for two rope lengths. From there the rock eases

in difficulty and the chimneys and cracks carry one slightly right toward the base of a large overhang. Chimneys choked with ice force extremely delicate free climbing to gain a large system of ledges suitable for bivouac. Climb these ledges right and up, thereby avoiding the large overhang, until a good stance is reached before the start of a delicate traverse into the couloir between the Central and Hidden pillars. Climb rock and nearly vertical ice for 5 meters until layback cracks and small flakes carry one slightly left and up for 40 meters of difficult free climbing to a broken area of snow and large blocks. (Bivouac area). A conspicuous red wall with shallow vertical cracks starts from the upper left hand edge of this area. Large portions of the wall overhang while the rest is vertical. (The Red Wall continues for 160 meters and is the area of greatest difficulty). Start the Red Wall with 8 meters of free climbing and then climb with direct aid to a small stance with one foot in *étriers*. The next lead is a combination of difficult artificial and free climbing. It bears left over two small overhangs (roofs), to a good stance where water may be found in late afternoon. Above this ledge there is what appears to be a pillar in low relief. Gain this pillar and the cracks above to a poor stance below an overhang. This is an extremely difficult free lead on small holds. From this stance climb the overhang and up a jam crack for 10 meters and then traverse left into a steeply overhanging chimney, with good holds, leading to a ledge. From here traverse up and right on ice, steep snow, and slabs to the couloir between the Hidden and Central pillars. Climb in the couloir and over an overhang of ice near the top. From here climb up and left on broken slabs until the summit of the Hidden Pillar is reached. From here climb the steep loose snow of the arête above for about 200 meters until the firm windslab of the summit ridge is reached. Follow the ridge to the summit of Mont Blanc de Courmayeur.

This climb is now the Frêne face "direct" and the most difficult route on Mont Blanc. The excellent quality of rock, the technical difficulty, the high altitude, and wild surroundings of the Frêne face combine to make a route of great proportions.

Summary of Statistics

AREA: Mont Blanc Alps, France and Italy.

ASCENTS: Aiguille du Fou, summit reached July 26, 1963 (Frost, Fulton, Harlin, Hemming) — first ascent of south face.

Mont Blanc, August 1 and 2, 1963 (Frost, Harlin) — first ascent of Hidden Pillar of Frêne.

PERSONNEL: Thomas Frost, Stewart Fulton, John Harlin, Gary Hemming.