

THE "SYDNEY ROUTE", FRENCHMANS CAP

A 1996 ascent of one of Tasmania's classic mountain rock-climbs, the "Sydney Route" (originally known as the A Toi la Gloire), which soars 400 metres up the vertiginous southeast face of Frenchmans Cap.

by Grant Dixon



The rack felt rather heavy as we left the tents, however it seems to be a climbing axiom that whatever piece of pro is left behind to save weight on a long climb is the piece one needs at the most delicate moment on lead, so we took the lot.

The day was already warm by 7am, and we were rather sweaty by the time we scrambled up the scree gully towards the base of the climb, the soaring southeast face seeming to hang above us. Up there it would be dark and shady, and we would later be grateful for the jackets we wore. However on cooler days the climb can be rather cold.

"The rock, for the most part, is of excellent quality", stated the guidebook. I reflected on this several times during the first few so-called pitches - a wet crack, downward-growing *Milligania* covered slopes, and loose rock. It became very apparent why Bryden Allen and Reg Williams sought a direct start to the climb in 1972.

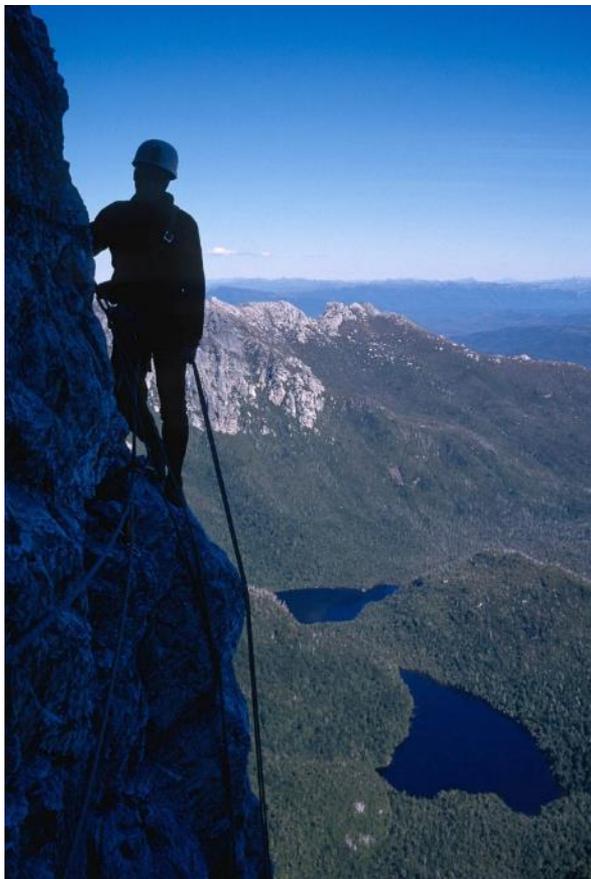
Sometime later we managed to get lost, or rather spent some time debating the merits of two alternative options. We eventually selected what turned out to be the correct option, but not before I'd led half a pitch in the wrong direction, and then had to downclimb wet, loose and partly overhanging rock - not a great start.

However, the "excellent" rock does exist, and seems even better when one finally reaches it. Clean, exposed corners and walls soar towards the rooves above, which are avoided by a couple of leftward

traverses prior to the line becoming damp and unattractive. The ripples, small cracks and odd-angled edges of the quartzite take some getting used to, but eventually feel quite secure.

I was glad it was John's turn to lead pitch 8, a couple of moves around an arete with neither the good holds nor the site for protection apparent until committed to the moves. It was fine climbing however, and after traversing 5 or 6 metres the face and a crack above led upwards. Now out of the broad chimney, the exposure was massive.

This is where the route's Melbourne Variant departs from the original line by continuing the traverse even further leftwards. Perhaps the two Chris' (Baxter and Dewhirst, the first ascensionists of the variant, in 1968) were moving so fast (they reportedly did the entire climb in 4^{3/4} hours!) that they missed the original upward line?



We contemplated the next pitch, the so-called L'escalier du Diable (Devil's Stairway), from the comfort of a good belay stance, a 20 metre rising traverse across the vertical left wall, and it was my lead. An early article had described this pitch as "positively airy" and certainly it was best not to contemplate the space below; 300 metres of partly overhanging rock now separated us from the scree.

I led off, returning after only a couple of moves, the bulging wall forcing me off balance. I then tried climbing upwards first, and so it went - little edges to lay off, a couple of good cracks for protection, and a delicate little side shuffle along a narrow ledge part way, with only tiny handholds on the wall above.

A small ledge right on the nose of the arete ends the pitch, and is probably the most spectacular position on the entire climb. The dark now-shady scree, and forest and lakes still further below, are another world, and even the smooth crystalline quartzite slabs above De Gaulles Nose opposite us seem remote and inaccessible. The early ascensionists belayed here using a "small, pointed knob" but I am rather glad of the modern friends placed in the horizontal crack below as I prepare to bring John across. My belay is semi-hanging, to leave the ledge free for John. My fingers cramp and, back at the other belay, John's also (in sympathy perhaps?) as I pull the spare rope across, dragging around the arete - we should have toned those muscles with a bit more climbing during the preceding months. The spare rope dangles below, several metres clear of the face, emphasising the steepness. Chris, our

companion, has walked up to the summit and appears above, silhouetted by sunlight, and hails us both perched on the little ledge.

A delicate traverse across into a gully ends the major difficulties. However above lay three further pitches of easy but enjoyable climbing, a gully, cracks, chimney and chockstones, before the alpine slopes below Frenchmans Cap's summit.

Cold water flowing from the summit snowfield soothes our dry mouths and throats, then we join Chris, and his welcome scroggin bag (especially the jelly babies) on top. A great outing!