

A MOUNTAIN UNVEILED

A revealing analysis of Cerro Torre's tallest tale.

ROLANDO GARIBOTTI



Cesare Maestri standing before a two-meter model of Cerro Torre crafted by Elio Orlandi. The occasion is a meeting in Male, Italy, in 1999 to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Maestri's claim to the first ascent of Cerro Torre. Maestri was unable to identify his route line on the model and had to be helped by Orlandi and Maurizio Giarolli.
Ken Wilson/Baton Wicks Archive

If someone told you he had just run a 10-minute mile you would shrug your shoulders and say “so what.” If someone said he had just run a three-minute mile you would be amazed and skeptical, and a reasonable response would be to ask for evidence. Mountaineering reports sometimes fall into the latter category, and if evidence is not forthcoming one is left with the difficult decision of how to assess these claims.

It is not for journalists to doubt the word of climbers, but what they can and should do is to obtain convincing accounts of climbs before according them proper credit. It is essential that magazine and journal editors are not credulous, for we all rely on the accuracy of such records.

One of the best-known cases in modern times is Cesare Maestri’s claim to have completed, in a mere seven days the first ascent of Cerro Torre, in 1959. This supposed ascent was carried out with Austrian Toni Egger, who, according to Maestri’s account, fell to his death during the descent, taking with him their only camera. While this supposed climb was initially taken at face value, climbers gradually started to take a closer look. Maestri’s claim clearly surpassed all the highest achievements of its day in terms of difficulty, speed, and style. The great French alpinist Lionel Terray called it “the most important alpinistic endeavor of all time,” a description still accurate today, considering that Maestri’s claimed line is still unrepeated despite numerous attempts by some of the world’s finest alpinists.

The jagged Cerro Torre is located in the Chalten Massif in southern Patagonia, in a group of dramatic peaks that include the well-known Cerro Fitz Roy. Cerro Torre is one of the most startling mountains in the world and would rank among the world’s hardest if it wasn’t for Maestri’s very own “Compressor Route” on its south-east ridge. Maestri came close to climbing this line in 1970 when, using a gas-operated air compressor, he placed some 400 bolts to reach a point about 35 meters below the summit, which he considered a valid ascent.

Starting in the late 1960s, serious doubts arose regarding the supposed 1959 ascent. Such doubts first originated in Italy from the likes of Carlo Mauri, a well-respected alpinist from Lecco who had attempted the Torre’s west face in 1958. Later, it was the British who picked up the inquiry, particularly Ken Wilson, editor of the renowned *Mountain* magazine. Later still, this subject was to become a staple of countless magazine articles. Maestri had numerous opportunities to present a plausible scenario, in conferences, interviews, and magazine articles, yet, he has repeatedly failed to make a convincing case.

Today the controversy remains unresolved. As 2004 commemorates the thirtieth anniversary of the first undisputed ascent of Cerro Torre (completed by a large Ragni di Lecco team led by Casimiro Ferrari via the west face), it seems appropriate to bring closure to this topic. This fine ascent remains eclipsed by the 1959 claims and the 1970 “bolt-aided” near miss.

Raised in northern Patagonia, I have had the opportunity to climb in the Chalten Massif countless times, making ascents of many of the area’s towers, including the first complete ascent of the north face of Fitz Roy in 1996, and the first alpine-style ascent of Fitz Roy’s southwest face in 1999. I became intrigued with the Egger-Maestri episode after meeting many of those involved in the early history of the area, including Folco Doro Altan, Walter Bonatti, Cesarino Fava, Casimiro Ferrari, John Bragg, and Jim Donini, among many others. Realizing that there were serious doubts concerning Maestri’s claims, and that there were a number of key issues not previously addressed, I decided to investigate the matter in hopes of shedding more light on the issue.

Earlier attempts to validate Maestri’s claims failed to take account of all the available material: one of the major hurdles has apparently been the variety of languages in which the important information was available. My knowledge of the languages concerned was invaluable researching



The east flank of the Cerro Torre group, showing: (1) Compressor route, (2) Devil's Directissima, Fistravec-Jeglic-Karo-Knez-Kozjek-Podgornik, 1986, (3) Calza-Giovanazzi-Gobbi-Salvaterra, 2001, (4) Bragg-Donini-Wilson, 1976 route, (5) Giarolli-Orlandi, 1998, (6) Salvaterra and partners, (7) Bonapace and partners, (8) Central Ice Gully, Bonapace-Dunser-Ponholzer, 1994, (9) Burke-Proctor, 1981 line, (10) Ponholzer-Steiger, 1998 line. (a) lower dihedral; (b) Egger-Fava-Maestri gear cache and likely highest point attained, (c) triangular snowfield, (d) middle buttress, (e) English box portaledge, (f) east dihedral, (g) Col of Conquest, (h) north ridge, (i) north face, (j) east face, (k) southeast ridge, (l) Alimonta-Claus-Maestri, 1971 highpoint. *Rolando Garibotti* (2)

this article. My analysis is based primarily on the various accounts written by Cesare Maestri and Cesarino Fava, many of which I translated personally from the original Italian. Fava's accounts are vital considering his claim to have climbed with Egger and Maestri to the Col of Conquest (the col between Torre Egger and Cerro Torre) during the claimed first ascent. Because no trace of the trio's passage has ever been found more than 300 meters up the wall, and since the first-hand accounts of Maestri's purported ascent above that point are vague and contradictory, Fava's descriptions are worthy of close inspection.

THE LOWER DIHEDRAL

In late January 1959, Egger, Fava, and Maestri began climbing the 1,200-meter-high east face, beginning with a 300-meter dihedral (the "lower dihedral"). Fava describes this feature: "The 300-meter lower dihedral took several days of exhausting work; three days in which Cesare danced chillingly among bolts and aiders."²¹ Maestri states: "This dihedral presents difficulties of up to the fifth and sixth grade, including long sections of difficult aid climbing, some of which required bolts. We fixed ropes all the way to its end, where we made a gear deposit with all the equipment we had left."²¹ He later describes the fixed ropes as 12-mm hemp ropes.

In his book *Arrampicare e il mio mestiere*³ Maestri describes at length the four days it took them to climb and fix ropes on the lower dihedral. In this account, Maestri repeatedly comments on the difficulty of the climbing and the amount of physical effort required. On January 12 he notes: “Today was very tiring... only managed to climb 30 meters.”^{3.1} On the next day: “Every meter up here takes a lot of effort, the climbing is very hard, the wall is steep and blank. I manage, slowly, one meter at a time.”^{3.2} He goes on to say, “I am so very tired.”^{3.3} After a day in which they were not able to climb due to bad weather, Maestri describes January 15, “I am exhausted and it’s barely the start of the day.”^{3.4} Later that same day he describes reaching a small ledge below a triangular snowfield above the end of the dihedral: “Below me are 300 meters of difficult climbing, another obstacle that we have surpassed, but at this point I am completely exhausted.... I have continuous cramps in my arms and my hands are totally trashed....”^{3.5} After these few days of activity Maestri became sick and had to rest for several days before being able to descend from the snow cave they had dug near the base of the face—their so-called third camp—to their second camp, located at the foot of the formation known as El Mocho.

This initial 300-meter dihedral presents difficulties far less severe than the upper portion



The east flank of the Cerro Torre group, showing approximately Maestri and Egger’s purported line of ascent (1) and descent (2), as described by Maestri. Also shown: (a) gear cache and end of fixed ropes—no trace of passage has been found above this point, (b) first bivouac, Col of Conquest, (c) second bivouac—2,720m according to Maestri, (d) third and fourth bivouacs—2,980m according to Maestri, (e) fifth bivouac—2,550m according to Maestri, (f) sixth bivouac and site of Egger’s death according to Maestri. Please see the photo on the following page for Maestri’s detailed route lines on the north face.



The north face of Cerro Torre, as seen from the top of Torre Egger, showing: (1) Burke-Proctor, 1981 line, (2) Ponholzer-Steiger, 1998 approximate line, (3) Chiapa-Conti-Ferrari-Negri, 1974 route—(P) marks the site where the photo on page 146 was taken, (4) Maestri and Egger's reported line of ascent as marked by Maestri in a photograph in *L'Europeo* 704, April 1959, page 34, showing ascent and descent bivouac sites (x), (5) Maestri and Egger's reported line of ascent as marked by Maestri in a photograph in *La Montagne*, April 1960, page 210, showing bivouac sites (o)—note how much the lines and bivouac sites differ. *Jay Smith*

somewhat more complicated technique: "We go up to the base of the lower dihedral all together, and, using the fixed ropes, we surmount it. I go up first and belay Cesarino, who belays Toni, while I go up the next fixed line before repeating the whole process again."³⁶ These two descriptions give a good picture of the equipment and tedious techniques the three men had at their disposal in 1959—the 12mm hemp ropes, the tiring and slow prusik techniques, and the belays while prusiking—and thus indicate a time-consuming process.

Maestri relates that upon reaching the triangular snowfield at the top of the lower dihedral, "We cross it, making a diagonal traverse to a series of cracks that lead from the edge of the snowfield

of their claimed line, and considering the effort that Maestri describes in surmounting the lower dihedral, one cannot help but wonder how, in a matter of a two weeks they managed to acquire the additional fitness and skill necessary to complete the visionary ascent they later claimed.

TO THE COL OF CONQUEST

The following 10 days brought continuous storms, and therefore Egger, Fava, and Maestri, together with their support team—four young Argentinean university students (three of Italian origin), Augusto and Gianni Dalbagni, Juan Pedro Spickerman, and Angel Vincitorio—descended to base camp and even lower to rest.

Eventually the weather improved, and on January 28 they began their final attempt. Maestri writes: "...in silence Fava, Egger, and I tie in at the base of the east face."²² Fava, who was along to help carry equipment, describes ascending the fixed ropes they had left in place ten days earlier: "Pulling with our arms, we go up the fixed ropes of the lower dihedral using a prusik knot for safety."¹² Maestri describes a

to the base of the big, overhanging east dihedral... It is about 150 meters from the snowfield to here, with difficulties in the fourth and fifth grade [about US 5.6]; pitons used 15-20."²³ The above description, even though vague, clearly implies that the trio supposedly climbed on rock above the triangular snowfield, and not the obvious central ice gully. The parties that have since climbed through this section, including Bragg/Donini/Wilson, Wyvill/Campbell-Kelly, Proctor/Burke, Bonapace /Ponholzer and Salvaterra have all found that the terrain in this middle section is far more difficult than what Maestri describes, involving either difficult aid or fairly difficult free-climbing (5.9 to 5.10).

From the base of the overhanging east dihedral to the Col of Conquest, Maestri recounts climbing "fourth, fifth, and one section of the sixth grade [US 5.9]."²⁴ In another account he says of this section: "Now the wall becomes a bit harder, and every now and then there are sections of difficulties of the sixth grade."³⁷ Both

quotes, when compared to his description in the previous paragraph, clearly imply that Maestri found the terrain between the base of the east dihedral and the col harder than the section below. Again, this directly contradicts the findings of those who have since climbed to the Col of Conquest via the same route. The technical difficulties are much more pronounced in the section directly above the triangular snowfield, while the so called "traverse" from the base of the overhanging east dihedral to the col, which Maestri describes as difficult, is in fact very easy. John Bragg, Jim Donini, and Jay Wilson climbed Maestri's claimed line as far as the Col of Conquest during their 1976 first ascent of Torre Egger. Donini later commented, "You peek around the corner and there is a ramp system going into the col about 120 meters long, and that's where Maestri claimed that it was very difficult doing that traverse, and from below it looks like a blank wall, when in fact you turn the corner and there is a ramp that is easy, it is not hard at all... from below you can't see the ramp."²⁴

Egger, Fava, and Maestri claim to have climbed at a blistering speed up the 700 meters to the col, with Maestri describing that they arrived "around three in the afternoon..."⁵¹ This would



An aerial view of the Cerro Torre group from the northwest, showing from left to right Cerro Standhardt, Torre Egger, and Cerro Torre, as well as: (1) Burke-Proctor, 1981 line, (2) Ponholzer-Steiger, 1998 approximate line, (3) Bonapace-Dunser-Ponholzer, 1993, (4) Giarolli-Orlandi-Ravizza, 1994 line, (5) Chiapa-Conti-Ferrari-Negri, 1974 route. Also: (a) Col of Hope, (b) Col of Conquest, (c) north ridge (rising directly above the Col of Conquest; in his writings Maestri refers to it as "northwest" ridge), (d) north face, (e) northwest face, (f) west face, (g) the Helmet, (h) Punta Shanti, (i) Punta Herron, (j) Lago Viedma, (k) Cerro Solo. *Pat Morrow*

have been 11 hours²¹ after they began from the foot of the face. Taking into account the techniques and equipment used in 1959, it would be unprecedented if they had managed to move so swiftly. Contemporary ascents on Fitz Roy and the Paine Towers suggest that such fast times with 1950s gear were virtually impossible.

In spite of the scale of the task at hand and the early hour, Egger and Maestri supposedly decided to spend the night at the col, while Fava, having done his share taking a load to this point, returned to the ground. Considering that Fava had to carry an extra rope—a 200-meter rope according to their descriptions—plus additional gear for him to descend safely, one wonders what else could he have carried to make his arduous climb to the col worthwhile? The 200-meter rope alone would have weighed at least 16 kilograms.

Fava recounts how Egger encouraged him to descend immediately, which he supposedly did. After being lowered across the “big traverse,” which, as described earlier, is in fact a slanting ramp that slashes across the base of the north face, Fava recovered one of their 200-meter perlon ropes, which had supposedly been left fixed, and started descending on his own, “using Dülfer technique, separating the ropes by putting the ice axe between them.”¹³ After his incredibly long and very fast day climbing to the Col of Conquest, Fava, though using a rudimentary and slow rappel system, managed to make a very speedy descent. He writes: “I arrived at the glacier at dark, as the highest point of Fitz Roy was still glowing with the last rays of sun,”¹⁴ a fact confirmed by Maestri, who writes, “In the late evening, when the sun illuminated only the top of Fitz Roy, Cesarino arrived at the glacier.”^{3,8}

The claimed speeds of both the team’s ascent to the col and Fava’s solo descent are indeed puzzling. Fava claimed to have climbed and descended 700 meters of difficult terrain in a mere 16 hours. This is would have been an unlikely feat in 1959, but the matter becomes muddier. In 1999 Fava completely revised his account in his book *Patagonia: Terra di sogni infrati*.⁶ In it Fava writes, “Night surprised me at the upper edge of the triangular snowfield. Still clipped to the ropes, I dug into the snow to make myself a small snow cave....”^{6,1} He later describes how he spent the night and eventually regained the fixed ropes and got down to their lower camp the following morning.^{6,2,7} He also mentions that he rappelled using what appears to be an unusual and potentially dangerous (due to rope burning) double prusik technique,^{6,3} using one as a brake and one for safety, as opposed to his earlier Dülfer rappel description.¹³ In neither account does Fava give a precise description of his descent from the col or how he completed the descent so quickly.

While Egger and Maestri continued upward, Fava supposedly spent the following six days at the base of the mountain awaiting his companions’ return. His description of these few days is important and is addressed later.

THE ICE SHEET

Above the Col of Conquest, Maestri claims to have been able to ascend courtesy of a sheet of ice that covered the north ridge in its entirety. Maestri: “... we attack a crust of snow and ice of variable thickness, from 20 centimetres to one meter, which was carried by the wind and pressed against the blank slabs of the north ridge. For 300 meters we go up climbing on air.”^{9,1} Clearly this description is too vague to be evaluated seriously, and yet it is a good example of the lack of detail given by Maestri regarding the upper portion of their claimed climb (whereas the initial 300 meters are described in great detail). Often times, during, and immediately after severe storms,

Cerro Torre is coated with a thin veil of frost, which to the unfamiliar eye might look like potentially climbable ice. However, this veil is only a layer of frozen humidity, with no solid bond to the rock, which would provide no purchase for a climber, and which promptly falls off. Nobody has ever found the ice conditions Maestri described and there are no comparable climbs where wind blown frost encrusted on an exposed and near vertical blank granite ridge has proved climbable. Maestri later made puzzling comments regarding the ice on his supposed route. When referring to Carlo Mauri's west face attempt in 1970, and comparing it to his supposed 1959 ascent he said, "I watched parts of their film on television—a solid wall of ice. But on our side, we never encountered a wall of ice."⁹

Both Toni Egger and Cesare Maestri were accomplished climbers. Egger, a guide, was one of the best climbers of his time, with many fine ascents in the Dolomites, as well as the western Alps, Turkey, and Peru. Some of his finest ascents include the northwest face of Piz Badile, countless ascents in the Dolomites (including a 95-minute solo ascent of Spigolo Giallo on Cima Piccola), and the heralded first ascent of Nevado Jirishanca in the Peruvian Andes. Maestri had done countless fine solo ascents in the Dolomites, including the first solo of the Solleder route on Civetta's northeast face and the first solo of the Solda-Conforto Route on the south face of Marmolada. In contrast with Egger, Maestri had climbed little outside his home turf, the Dolomites. One of the rare exceptions was in 1955, when he completed a solo winter ascent of the southwest ridge of the Matterhorn. In spite of their superb credentials, the difficulties they faced on Cerro Torre are in an entirely different league, far surpassing those found on these earlier ascents.

Above the col, Egger and Maestri supposedly carried heavy packs while they "climbed on air."^{8.1} Maestri writes: "We take a 200-meter rope, which we use doubled, 10 etriers, 30 pitons, 100 bolts, 30 ice-screws, wooden wedges, 30 meters of cord, food for three or four days, and all the bivouacking equipment. The packs are very heavy, weighing some 25 kilograms [55 pounds]."^{3.9} Considering the weight of equipment at the time, could they have carried all this up such a difficult climb?

Maestri reports that they placed 30 bolts and used 15 ice-screws during that second day on the tower.^{2.5} Regarding the bolts, he comments "to make a two and a half centimeter hole more than 500 hammer blows are necessary"^{8.2} and it takes "approximately 35 to 40 minutes"^{3.10} for each.



Near the location Bragg and Burke describe as the possible site of Toni Egger's fatal accident. *Jim Donini*



Phil Burke leading difficult mixed climbing in the upper portion of the north face. For the location where this photo was taken see the photo on page 142 (P marks the spot). *Tom Proctor*

This is not surprising considering the hard granite and the equipment of the time. Thirty bolts at 35 minutes each is more than 17 hours, an extraordinary amount of time considering the speed with which they claimed to have climbed the upper part of the mountain. Also, the straight-pick toothless ice axes, and thick pointed crampons from that time were completely inadequate to swiftly dance up near vertical ice, to say nothing of providing the necessary security for bolting maneuvers.

Regarding their supposed line above the col, Maestri writes: “we have two options: to cut via ramps and gullies the whole west face [the face right of the col, probably of northwest orientation], to enter a chimney...or to benefit from the unusual snow conditions that cover a 300-meter section of the north face.... We choose this second option, since the north face is better protected from the wind.”²⁶ He also states: “We climbed the face, not the ridge leading to the col itself. It is not as steep as you might expect. Our line was about 100 meters to the left of the ridge.”¹⁰ Regarding the terrain they found that day, he goes on: “The angle of the climbing was about the same as that of the gullies between the ice towers on the southeast ridge....about 45-50 degrees, I suppose. The same sort of thing, anyway, and the same general conditions.”¹⁰ These two statements confirm that Maestri’s descriptions are implausible. The lower portion of the north face is nearly vertical, not 50-degree terrain that remotely resembles the ice towers on the southeast ridge. Jim Donini describes it as a “typical granite big-wall, absent of horizontal ledges or traverse lines.”¹¹ Further questions arise from the fact that two parties who have climbed the first and only crack system left of the ridge found no evidence of Maestri’s passage. More on this later.

On their second day above the Col of Conquest, Maestri reports climbing “toward the west flank, since the north side is too steep and extremely difficult.”²⁷ He says they covered 250 meters, using 20 pitons, and found the terrain at an “angle between 50 to 60 degrees.”²⁸ Once again, this

description differs substantially with the terrain encountered later by other climbers (seen from a distance, the angle of that flank of the mountain is quite uniform, nearly 80 degrees).

On January 31, presumably their fourth day on the wall, Egger and Maestri, bivouacking 150 meters below the top, supposedly climbed over the summit ice mushrooms without great difficulty, reached the summit, and started their descent. That Maestri does not give a precise description of how they surpassed the notoriously difficult summit mushrooms, which hang prominently over the north and northwest faces, is quite telling. Englishman Phil Burke describes his and Tom Proctor's experience during a near miss on the north face a mere 50 meters to the left of where Maestri is supposed to have passed: "The ice was just overhanging mush, impossible to climb. I flayed with the now useless tools, stuck my arms in, edged up, but there was no purchase or traction."⁴

THE DESCENT

Maestri says that at the summit the weather started deteriorating: "We felt safe only with the ice axes planted deep in the snow so as not to be blown off by the wind."²⁹ The first few rappels from the summit were apparently all from snow mushrooms and ice screws, with the exception of the last two of the day, which "we made using bolts, having at that point dropped below the limit of the ice..."²¹⁰ After supposedly spending the night in the same spot as the previous night, they continued down. "The first of February we continue descending, the warm wind melting the snow that falls noisily... There is not a single possibility of placing normal pitons. For every rappel we are forced to place two bolts under the continuous spindrift."²¹¹

Maestri continues: "We decided to descend diagonally across the north face instead of going directly to the col so as to arrive to the lower end of the traverse since, after Cesarino recovered the rope we had left fixed there, the traverse would have been a major obstacle for us."²¹² Again, in this case, Maestri appears to imply that the traverse from the base of the east dihedral to the col was difficult, when in fact all other teams have found it straightforward. A diagonal descent across the mostly blank and very steep north face would clearly prove much more troublesome than a few rappels down a ramp, especially since they would not be



Looking down from the upper portion of Torre Egger during its first ascent in 1974. To the right is the snow of the Col of Conquest. The blank face above the snow is the lower portion of Cerro Torre's north face where Maestri and Egger claim to have climbed. The ramps that slash across the base of this face are the easy ramps leading to the Col of Conquest, which Maestri described as being quite difficult.

Jim Donini



Daniele Chiappa and a friend on the summit of Cerro Torre, 1974. Chiappa, Mario Conti, Casimiro Ferrari, and Pino Negri were the first to reach the summit. *Baton Wicks Archive.*

able to re-use the many bolts they claim to have placed along the line of ascent.

It supposedly took them two full days to descend to the vicinity of their fixed ropes that reached the end of the lower dihedral. "Around 7 p.m. on February 2, barely 100 meters from the fixed ropes, we decided to spend the night on the right edge of the triangular snowfield. I drilled some bolts and we started digging a hole in order to spend the night."^{2,12} Maestri claims to have placed three bolts at this

location (these have never been found despite numerous parties climbing through this area), and describes being too tired to continue.^{3,11} Egger was apparently unsure about this bivouac and decided to have a look below. Maestri was supposedly lowering him when Egger got hit by an avalanche that apparently cut his rope and swept him down the abyss, taking with him their only camera and much of the gear. Considering that it was their third day descending, and that they were supposedly tantalizingly close to the fixed lines, Egger's eagerness to continue seems quite understandable.

After collecting himself from the loss of his partner, Maestri claims to have spent the night at that location and, "At dawn on February 3 I exit from my hole... I start descending with the piece of rope that I have left."^{2,13} He continues: "Hours go by until I get to the fixed ropes, along which I descend. The wall is hell; just a few meters above the glacier my feet slip and I don't manage to hold myself with my hands and therefore I fall... The spirit of survival takes me across the tormented glacier to a point some 300 meters away from Camp 3, where Cesarino had stayed alone for six days waiting, and therefore it is he who found me a few hours later..."^{2,14}

SUBSEQUENT ATTEMPTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Maestri describes the hardware used as follows: "All in all we placed 120 pitons, 65 ice-screws, 70 bolts, and 20 wooden wedges. At the start we took two 200 meter ropes, 10 etriers, 50 pitons, 100 bolts, 30 ice-screws..."^{2,15} Since much of this equipment would have been left in place as rappel anchors, it is surprising that nothing has ever been found above the end of the lower dihedral, 300 meters above the ground. In the last 30 years at least 10 different parties have climbed past that point, seven of which reached the Col of Conquest.

During their ascent of Torre Egger, Bragg, Donini, and Wilson were the first to follow Maestri's footsteps to the Col of Conquest. They found copious amounts of gear in the lower dihedral, but *nothing* above. Also particularly suspicious was a large deposit of obviously unused gear—including ropes, two packs, many pitons, and wooden wedges—which they found on a

small ledge at the top of the lower dihedral, 40 feet below the triangular snowfield. This gear could not have been taken further up the climb and dumped on the descent, because Maestri claims that Egger fell and took what was left of the summit gear with him. Maestri explained that two days before the final attempt they had made the decision to climb alpine style above the gear cache, therefore using less equipment than they had originally intended. However, Egger, Fava and Maestri had reached this point only once before the summit push, so it would have been unlikely that the three men would have been able to carry all the equipment found at this location plus all the equipment that was described as used on the final climb. Donini also points out that the last pitch leading up to Maestri's gear cache was fixed in its entirety, with the rope running through aid placements spaced very close together, with clove hitches on every other piton. Why would Maestri leave and not clean that pitch?

Bragg and Donini started off believing Maestri's claim but lost faith during their climb, when their own observations were inconsistent with Maestri's story. Bragg commented that they were particularly surprised to not find any gear on the traverse to the col, where Egger, Fava, and Maestri claimed to have fixed a rope: "There seemed to be only one natural traverse line into the col, and as the climbing was mostly easy in this section, it seems unlikely that they would have gone a different way. Yet we found nothing."¹³ It is also troubling that the four parties that managed to climb a significant amount of terrain on the north and northwest faces above the col found no trace of the 60 or so bolts Maestri claims to have placed there, nor did they see any evidence of passage on Maestri's claimed descent line in the center of the north face.

In 1978 Ben Campbell-Kelly and Brian Wyvill climbed the initial 450 meters of Maestri's line, including the buttress up and right of the triangular snowfield, then moved left to attempt the impressive east dihedral, at the base of which they placed a box-style portaledge, which they left fixed.¹⁴ In 1981, using the same portaledge, Englishmen Phil Burke and Tom Proctor, among the finest English climbers of the era, pushed the line further to the top of the east dihedral. From that point they made a 25-meter traverse to the edge of the north face, followed by a 65-meter horizontal traverse to the only major groove system in the heart of the face. Before retreating, they climbed 100 meters



Casimiro Ferrari approaching the summit mushroom above the west face during the first ascent of Cerro Torre, 1974. *Daniele Chiappa/Baton Wicks Archive*

more up the rightmost of two obvious grooves. Burke, a highly competent climber, said that the second-to-last pitch was the hardest of his life and required hooking the drooped-pick axes into the ice at the back of a crack. The last pitch, which was aborted, stopped at a blank wall beneath the snow of the first snow shoulder, a mere 30 meters below the summit ridge.¹⁵ Burke: "The grade would be modern ED 3/4, with high standard rock pitches and particularly difficult ice pitches from 70° to overhanging, as well as dry tooling on one pitch, where I fell jumping from a sky-hook for a good hold! The average angle of the wall is more than 70°."¹¹ Proctor reported that the north face and ridge were much like El Capitan, very steep and without many climbable features. Their descriptions clearly establish how steep and featureless the terrain is, contradicting Maestri's description of 45-50 degree terrain, and demonstrate how unlikely it would be for such a wall to be covered by climbable, wind-blown frost as Maestri claimed.

In 1999 Austrians Toni Ponholzer and Franz Steiger climbed an obvious crack system on the north face, just to the left of the north ridge, to about 200 meters below the summit.¹⁶ On the lower 300 meters of the north face itself, their line coincides almost exactly with the line Maestri claims to have climbed on the first day above the Col of Conquest,¹⁰¹ where he claims to have placed 30 bolts in a single day. The Austrians enjoyed dry conditions, which allowed them a close look at the face and ridge. They saw no traces of passage. (Two Italians, Maurizio Giarolli and Elio Orlandi, had climbed 150 meters up this line in 1998 and similarly found no evidence of passage.)¹⁷ Ponholzer, who by all accounts is an extremely well-versed mountaineer and rock climber, has made six attempts to climb above the Col of Conquest. Only on his last attempt, totally familiar with the terrain, was he able to match Egger, Fava, and Maestri's supposed speed: reaching the col in one day.

Between the English (Burke-Proctor) and Austrian (Ponholzer-Steiger) attempts, most of the north face has been explored. Considering that Maestri's route line⁸³ and descriptions clearly delineate two separate lines for the ascent and descent, on which Maestri claims to have left copious quantities of equipment, it is hard to explain why no gear has been spotted.

The northwest face, which lies on the opposite side of the north ridge, has also seen a few visitors. Italians Maurizio Giarolli, Elio Orlandi, and Odoardo Ravizza climbed to the north ridge itself from the west, reaching it at a point 300 meters below the summit.¹⁸ Austrians Bonapace, Dunser, and Ponholzer crossed the Col of Conquest and climbed up the west side to 100 meters below the Italian's highpoint.¹⁹ Neither party found any trace of passage, even though Orlandi went as far as rappelling 50 meters straight down the north ridge from their highpoint and made several pendulums in hopes of finding something (Maestri claims that he and Egger moved to the northwest face on their second day of climbing above the col).

In 1998, some 500 meters from the ground, right next to the "English box portaledge," Giarolli and Orlandi found one ice piton that they claimed was from Maestri's team. In an article by Mark Synnot in the May 1999 issue of *Climbing* magazine, this claim was used as new evidence to support Maestri's case.²⁰ As it turns out, the piton has been identified by Phil Burke as one of his. Near the same location, Giarolli and Orlandi claimed to have found a handful of hemp rope they believe to be Maestri's. But once again this is most likely attributable to the English teams. Proctor points out that on one occasion a 200-meter rope with a knot at the end jammed straight down from their box site and that he was forced to rappel all the way down the jammed rope and jumal back up. He did not rappel down their route, but went down the edge of the central gully to the south; he saw no sign of any equipment. Even though there was some rockfall down the gully, Proctor believes that this would have been the obvious line of ascent for Maestri rather than the middle buttress.

FAVA'S CAMP

According to Cesarino Fava's diary, published in 1959,¹ after climbing to the Col of Conquest Fava returned to the snow cave (Camp 3) at the foot of the mountain on the evening of January 28. He claims to have spent the following six days waiting for his companions. It is difficult to understand why after such a long ascent to the Col of Conquest and the ensuing harrowing solo descent he did not descend to Camp 2, at the base of El Mocho, where the support team waited for him. Although one could argue that Fava might have been unwilling to descend the glacier on his own due to the hazardous nature of solo glacier travel, some curious facts arise from the original accounts. The young Argentinean support team report having visited the snow cave (Camp 3) the day after Fava's return, January 29, and found it empty.²¹¹ That same day Fava, in his own account, describes descending the glacier to the slabs below, within striking distance of Camp 2. "On the twenty-ninth I went outside when the sun was already high...I returned to the snow cave when the shade of the Torre invaded the slabs of El Mocho, where I had descended to hang out in the sun."¹⁵ Apparently the dangers of solo glacier travel did not much concern Fava, and somehow it appears that the two parties passed each other without meeting when traveling to and from the snow cave. Since the glacier provides only one obvious and safe route, this would have been impossible. Also, considering that the slabs of El Mocho that Fava describes descending to on January 29 are a mere half-hour away from Camp 2, one wonders why Fava would have decided against continuing down, especially when, according to Maestri's account in *Arrampicare e il mio mestiere*, Fava was clearly eager to have some company.³¹² In his 1999 book, *Patagonia Terra di sogni infranti*, Fava tells a very different story: he describes having been at the base of the east face when Dalbagni, Spickermann, and Vincitorio came up.⁶⁴ However, since the snow cave was located a mere 400 horizontal meters from the face it seems unlikely that they would not have seen each other or established contact.

On February 3 Fava claims that, having lost all hope, he decided to descend to Camp 2. As he was departing from the snow cave, he supposedly looked toward the face one last time and noticed a curious black object that turned out to be a very tired Maestri. That same day they claim to have descended to Camp 2. The following day Fava, together with Dalbagni and Spickermann returned to Camp 3 in an attempt to find Egger, but terrible weather conditions soon forced them to give up the search.⁶⁵

Fava's contradictions and lack of clarity cast substantial doubt on the reliability of his accounts. In the past, climbers accepted his recounting of the portion of the climb in which he was directly involved. One could easily argue that by claiming the first ascent of such a great prize, Maestri had substantial incentive to fabricate this ascent; yet, Fava appears to have had little to gain. However, when one takes into account the deep rivalry and competition within the Italian community in Buenos Aires at the time, between Patagonian veteran Folco Doro Altan and a group of émigrés from the Trento province, including Tito Lucchini and Fava himself, it becomes apparent that the weight of failure or success was as heavy for Fava as it was for Maestri. This rivalry had led two different expeditions to vie for the same peak in 1958, with Altan's team, including Walter Bonatti and Carlo Mauri, attacking it from the west, and Fava and Lucchini's team, including Maestri and other fine Trento climb-ers, from the east.

Further curious facts arise from Gianni Dalbagni's diary. Dalbagni, as mentioned earlier, was one of the four students who helped ferry loads throughout Maestri's expedition. His diary was published as a 16-article series, starting in March 1959 in an Italian language newspaper



Toni Egger's remains, found by Donini and partners almost two kilometers from the base of the wall. *Jim Donini*

circulating in Buenos Aires.²¹ Regarding the weather conditions, Dalbagni provides the following information. He describes the night of January 27 as one of very heavy rain, and only points out weather improvement in the early hours of January 29. Remember that Egger, Fava, and Maestri are supposed to have started their high-speed climb to the Col of Conquest in the early hours of the twenty-eighth. Of their ascent to the snow cave (Camp 3) on January 29, Dalbagni says that in spite of the blue skies the wind was extremely strong: "Even with our feet deep in the snow and the ice axes planted up to their head, the wind kept pushing us back... In the steep crest the walking got very exciting due to the strong gusts of wind..."^{21,2} This day, according to Maestri, he and Egger climbed above the Col of Conquest, on the exposed north ridge. One can only guess how strong the winds must have been up high considering the conditions at the base of the protected east face.

On January 30, Dalbagni describes perfect weather, but the next morning brings some clouds, and by mid-day rain engulfs him and his companions while strolling on the glacier, forcing them to a quick return to camp. On this day Maestri claims to have reached the summit. Of the first two days of February, Dalbagni writes: "Clouds with unremitting wind, snow, and rain."^{21,3} February 3: "It snowed all night; the strong wind even brought a lot of snow inside. Outside it's a white chaos."^{21,4} Chalten Massif weather conditions are always worse up high, with much stronger winds and more precipitation. For those who have had the chance to climb in this area, it becomes apparent that the weather information provided by Dalbagni hardly describes the type of extended good weather that a brilliant, very fast, and extremely difficult alpine ascent such as the one described by Maestri would require to be carried out.

EARLY DOUBTS

Doubts about Maestri's account arose immediately upon his return to Buenos Aires when an article in a local magazine directly implied that Maestri might be responsible for Egger's death.²² This led to a request by the Italian Consulate in Buenos Aires for the members of the expedition to give depositions about the events, but the matter was soon forgotten. (I tried to locate these depositions in Buenos Aires but found that they were shipped many years ago to Italy's national archive in Rome.)

It was not until 1970 that public statements casting doubt on Maestri's ascent were published

in Italy. Renowned alpinist Carlo Mauri, returning from a failed attempt on Cerro Torre, commented via telegram to the press "... we return, safe and sound from the impossible Cerro Torre,"^{23,1} implying that the mountain had never been climbed. Not long afterward, Franco Rho, a sports journalist well connected to climbing circles, described Mauri's failed attempt in one of Italy's major newspapers: "...he was not able to reach the summit of Cerro Torre, of that terrible Cerro Torre where no man has ever set foot."^{24,1} Around that same time the English media, particularly Ken Wilson, editor of *Mountain* magazine, picked up the matter. Wilson's suspicions were aroused after Pete Crew, Martin Boysen, Mick Burke, Jose Luis Fonrouge, and Dougal Haston failed to climb the southeast ridge in 1968. Haston had climbed the Eiger Direct in winter; Crew and Boysen has made the first winter ascent of the Phillip/Flamm route on the Civetta north face, and Fonrouge, had done the second ascent of FitzRoy, via the Supercanaleta. This was an extremely strong team noted for fast climbing, yet they made slow and laborious progress, exactly the same as all other teams on the mountain except for Maestri and Egger. When they returned, Crew told Wilson that the whole team doubted Maestri's claim in light of the sheer scale, difficulty, and weather of the Torre, as well as the vagueness of Maestri's descriptions. In 1976 what Bragg, Donini, and Wilson found, and did not find, added more fuel to the fire.

The lack of conclusive information and the many contradictions pointed out in this article are strong evidence against Maestri's claims. It is quite obvious that Maestri's descriptions do not match the terrain he claims to have climbed, terrain that still today, almost 50 years later and in spite of significant advances in equipment and technique, continues to repel all attempts. Maestri, as well as Fava, has had countless occasions to provide plausible evidence and to answer satisfactorily the numerous questions put forth by his critics, but has consistently failed to do so. It is indeed strange that Maestri would be so unwilling to provide a detailed and thorough description of what would be the finest climb ever. One might conclude that his unwillingness to do so constitutes evasion.

Curiously, on several occasions Maestri has dismissed the difficulty of his supposed climb. For example: "... I wish to state that, from the technical point of view, it was one of the easiest climbs of my life. It was certainly the most dangerous, and the only deadly one, but technically it was just a race, a race over a snow sheet."²⁵ Another example: "For Toni Egger, Cerro Torre was nothing—a Sunday stroll... You see, the serious difficulties—the grade 6 stuff—are in the lower part, which Fava had already helped us equip with fixed ropes."²⁹ Such comments, including the implication that the lower dihedral might be the crux of his claimed line, contradict reality.

CONCLUSIONS

What might be the reason why two people have apparently conspired to construct such a story? A likely explanation, and this is mere speculation, might have been the need they felt to make Egger's death somewhat more worthy, less painful, telling a story that spoke of glory and triumph, and not solely of tragedy. Fava himself gives a hint when he explains, "But why do we torment ourselves? Toni disappeared after having climbed in perfect alpine style the most difficult mountain in the world. A masterpiece. The great French alpinist Lionel Terray called it 'the most important alpinistic endeavor of all time.' Before it disappears behind a plateau I see in the distance the most beautiful and luminous crypt in the world, the one that protects the unforgettable Toni Egger. It

is not only important how one lives; it is also important how one dies.”⁶⁶

Fava’s commitment and devotion to Egger was never questioned. In early 1961 he returned to the area hoping to recover Egger’s body but was foiled by heavy snowfall. During that same trip Fava placed a commemorative plaque honoring the Austrian near the base of the east face.²⁶ Egger’s body was not discovered until 1975, when Bragg, Donini, and Mick Coffey came upon it a couple of kilometers from the base of Cerro Torre. It is unclear if the glacier could have moved Egger’s body that far in only 16 years, if indeed he fell from the wall as Maestri describes. In early 2003 more of Egger’s remains were found not far from the 1975 location. His camera has never been found.

To speculate what might have happened to Egger is not this article’s intent. However, the area of the triangular snowfield is particularly dangerous, being exposed to falling ice, as well as to avalanches that sweep the gully at the top of the lower dihedral, just above Maestri’s gear cache. It was in this gully in 1976 that John Bragg found a prominent block sticking out of the ice, with a double 3/8" perlon rope wrapped around it. The rope struck him as remarkably similar to that which they had found on Egger’s remains a year earlier. A chill ran down his spine when he noticed that the double end of the rope was broken and frayed exactly as Egger’s had been, and for a brief instant he had a vision that this was where Egger had died, leading out toward the snowfield. A week or two later, while rappelling, Bragg kicked off a monstrous avalanche from the snowfield which swept the very gully where he had found the frayed rope. He describes that gully as “a prime spot to be taken by an avalanche, the double rope catching around the block and then breaking.... Who knows?”¹³ Both Donini and Burke had similar feelings regarding Egger’s death. Burke writes: “Around the cache site the route is very prone to avalanches coming off the ice field, which channels all falling ice off the east face down the large corner system of the route. We initially thought that Egger was at this point when struck, hence all the gear being abandoned with complete pitches roped with carabiners on every peg. I very nearly got taken out here and just managed to shelter under an overhang.”¹¹ As Burke implies, an accident at this location would be the best explanation for Maestri’s team leaving the pitch leading to the cache completely fixed.

Frustrated over the doubts being voiced about his claims, Maestri returned to Cerro Torre in 1970.^{24,2} As mentioned earlier, he attacked the southeast ridge with a 200-pound air compressor, which he used to place some 400 bolts, reaching a point about 35 meters below the summit, from where, still on vertical rock, he retreated. He alleged that the snow mushroom above was not part of the mountain and that it would “blow off one of these days.” The amount of equipment and the style he used during this attempt helped spark further doubts regarding his 1959 claims. So striking was the contrast between these two so-called “ascents” that they appeared contradictory.

Taking all of the factors into account, Maestri and Fava’s descriptions of what took place in 1959 are completely unreliable. All a reasonable person could conclude would be that that in 1959, Maestri et al. attempted to climb the east face and reached a point 300 meters up the face in the vicinity of the triangular snowfield. Accounts of further progress are so imprecise and contradicted by other facts that they should be disregarded.

The evidence convinces me that Italians Daniele Chiappa, Mario Conti, Casimiro Ferrari, and Pino Negri were the first to stand on Cerro Torre’s summit when, on January 13, 1974, they completed their ascent of the west face. History has yet to give this ascent its rightful place.

REFERENCES:

The list below is an abbreviated version of the complete list of citations and bibliography. The complete list, with the original Italian that was translated for this article, can be found at www.AmericanAlpineClub.org (click on *American Alpine Journal*).

1. Cesarino Fava, "Dal Diario di Cesarino Fava," *Bollettino Società Alpinisti Tridentini* (March-April 1959): pp. 22-31.
2. Cesare Maestri, "Il Cerro Torre," *Club Alpino Italiano Rivista Mensile* vol. LXXX (July-Aug. 1961): pp. 205-211.
3. Cesare Maestri, *Arrampicare e il mio mestiere*, (Milano, Garzati, 1961): pp.109-171.
4. Alan Kearney, *Mountaineering in Patagonia* (Seattle, Cloudcap, 1993.)
5. Cesare Maestri, *Il Ragno delle Dolomiti*, (Milano, Rizzoli, 1981.)
6. Cesarino Fava, *Patagonia, Terra di sogni infratti*, (Torino: Centro Documentazione Alpina, 1999.)
7. Fabrizio Torchio, "Cosi arrivorocono sul Torre," *L'Adige* [Trento, Italy] (24 April, 1999.)
8. Cesare Maestri, "E Venne la morte Bianca," *L'Europeo* 704 (12 April, 1959): pp. 30-36.
9. Guido Carretto, "Cerro Torre Enigma: Maestri Speaks," *Mountain* 9 (May 1970): p. 32.
10. Ken Wilson et al. "Cesare Maestri," *Mountain* 23 (Sept. 1972): pp. 30-37.
11. Personal communication.
12. Cesare Maestri, "La Conquista del Cerro Torre," *Bollettino Società Alpinisti Tridentini* (March-April 1959): pp. 1-9.
13. John Bragg, letter to Ken Wilson (2 Oct., 1976)
14. *American Alpine Journal* 1979 p.256; and *Mountain* 61 p.13.
15. Phil Burke, "Cerro Torre: East Face," *Mountain* 79 (May-June 1981): pp. 40-43; and *AAJ* 1982 p.193-194.
16. *AAJ* 1999, p.333; and *High Mountain Sports* 203 p.81-82.
17. *Alp* 172 p.108.
18. *AAJ* 1995 p.212-213; and *Alp* 126 p.28-29.
19. Tommy Bonapace, "Cara de Hielo," *Gipfelsturmer* [Innsbruck, Austria] (1996): p.21.
20. Mark Synott, "The Maestri Enigma," *Climbing* 185 (May 1999): pp. 72-81, 130-134.
21. Gianni Dalbagni, "La dura conquista del Cerro Torre," *Corriere degli Italiani* [Buenos Aires] (March-April 1959). Sixteen articles starting on March 23, 1959.
22. Juan Roghi, "La Tragica Noche sobre los Andes," *El Hogar* 2570 [Buenos Aires] (6 March, 1959): pp. 77-81.
23. Franco Rho, "Carlo Mauri non ha chiuso con il Cerro Torre," *Rasegna Alpina* 15 (March-April 1959): pp. 84-91.
24. Cesare Maestri, *2000 metri della nostra vita*, (Milano, Garzati, 1972).
25. Male Conference [Trento, Italy] (1999) transcript record.
26. "Tentativo di Cesarino Fava per il ricupero di Toni Egger," *Bollettino Società Alpinisti Tridentini* (Jan.-Feb. 1961): p. 15.

This article has been adapted from Tom Dauer's upcoming book Cerro Torre: Mythos Patagonien. (AS-Verlag, Zürich 2004).

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR:

Rolando Garibotti has visited the Fitz Roy and Cerro Torre massif over a dozen times, the first at age 15 when he climbed Aguja Guillaumet. His finest ascents in that area include the first complete ascent of Tehuelche on the north face of Fitz Roy in 1996 and the second ascent of the Slovak Route on Fitz Roy's southwest face in 1999, both alpine style. Born in Italy, raised in Argentina, and currently living in the U.S., he considers himself a Bariloche national, as this is the place where he first developed his passion for the mountains and where, one day, he hopes to enjoy his old age. For the last five years he has been working on a guidebook to the Chalten Massif, which should be published soon.