

summit

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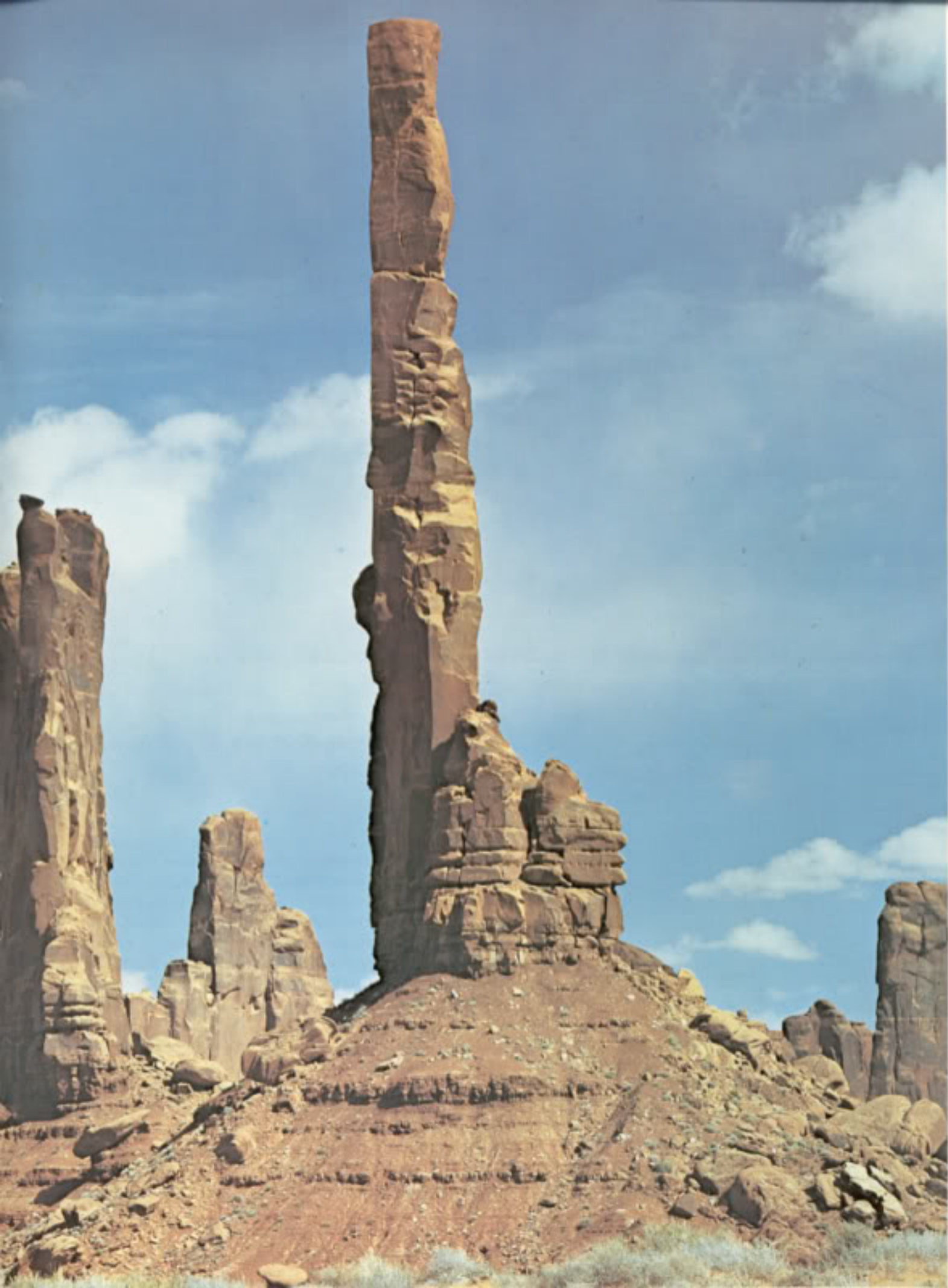


Totem Pole...

Monument Valley, Arizona

Photo by Ed Cooper







*Ken Wyrick
and
Eric Bjornstad
on the summit
of the
Totem Pole,
Arizona.*

the totem pole and the

At one time the thought of the Hollywood movie people popularizing my climbing retreats would have been unbearable. But, somehow, as the seasons pass by and as I have found myself less and less involved in the game, the competition and perhaps the ego of the climbing fraternity, I have had a greater urge to share my private places. For years now those treasured climbs have been on the high desert of southeastern Utah. There amid high plateaus and the wildly eroded canyons of the Colorado River are some of the most aesthetic free-standing towers in the world. They are unique in another respect as well: these towers, some higher and thinner than the Empire State building, are composed of a relatively soft sedimentary rock, cryptically called sandstone. Some strata of this rock will crumble like brown sugar in your fingers. Other layers are denser and can be climbed with care and caution. One of these spires was to become "Big Ben Tower" in the spy film "The Eiger Sanction."

I was contracted by Mike Hoover, Liaison for Clint Eastwood and Universal Studios. My job was to help locate a suitable tower, hire a climbing partner and "put the ropes up" for the filming crew. I showed Mike a number of outstanding towers and at last the 465-foot Totem Pole was chosen. The problem was it was located near the Utah-Arizona border within the Navajo's Tribal Park and the Indians had prohibited all climbing on their reservation several years before. Fortunately for Hollywood the Tribal Council had long been unhappy about the glittering hardware left on the "Pole" by the four previous ascents. A contract was negotiated which included a clean up bond and a guarantee that the "Pole" would be freed of all foreign material at the conclusion of the filming.

There was a preliminary meeting with Hoover and Eastwood at the famed Gouldings Trading Post on the Reservation. An enjoyable day was

Clint Eastwood,
Liaison for
Universal
Studios, on a
Tyrolean
traverse near
the Totem Pole.



eiger sanction

Text and Photos by Eric Bjornstad

spent hiking and reconnoitering the tower and in general getting to know one another.

I contacted veteran desert climber Ken Wyrick in Aspen. Ken and I had climbed comfortably together on soft rock and I was sure he would be as eager as I for this chance.

We began work in the Fall. Our job became routine though no less exciting. Each day at dawn we would either be deposited by helicopter atop one of the towers or mesas in the valley or be lifted to the start of our prusik lines.

There were two adrenalin flashes during our fourteen-day stint with the studio that I shall never forget. The first happened on a routine lift to the top of the "Pole." We were transported in a big cargo helicopter used to evacuate the injured in Vietnam. We wore headphones to keep in touch with the pilot. Most days one wheel could be set

on the tower to aid in the big bird's stabilization. On windy days though there would only be a momentary hover as we awaited the jump signal. One particularly breezy morning I received the go ahead and I leaned out of the belly of the Copter to find the tiny summit of the "Pole" about six feet beyond reach. The exposure was phenomenal. I reeled back and radioed for a little less distance.

The other red letter occurrence happened the morning following a violent windstorm. I was about halfway up the third prusik on the Totem Pole. Having just jumared past an overhang I was able to see a section of the rope previously obscured. About twenty feet above, the rope had abraded two-thirds of the way through and appeared ready to snap with the slightest encouragement. I was at least ten feet from the rock on a free hanging prusik at this point. Had there been a ledge or crack system to anchor into I would not have been able to reach it. I hung suspended in

to page 28, please



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The cameraman.

The Totem Pole and the Eiger Sanction

from page 25

terror. With considerable apprehension I ascended catlike to the abrasion. I eased past it, tied it off and wondered what condition the line above was in. The ropes had been anchored the night before but the high winds had managed to whip the perlon on the abrasive sandstone enough to cause severe damage.

There were other moments of excitement as we went about our multiple jobs of rigging hanging belays, setting up anchors for cameras and anchoring an impressive tyrolean traverse. Each evening after a long tired day we coptered back to Gouldings where Hoover, Eastwood and a handful of others were boarded. The balance of the crew stayed at the Holiday Inn in nearby Kayenta. The



*Ken Wyrick,
a veteran desert climber from Aspen,
on the Totem Pole.*

evenings were generally concluded with unsurpassed cuisine and a briefing on the next day's duties.

During the two weeks we were to meet the "stars" and for a while feel a part of something important happening. Each day seemed a little more exciting than the one before. Finally the filming company returned to Hollywood. The adventure of working among the army of personnel was past. The valley was silent and serene once more. I felt gratified that the "Pole" again belonged to the Indians. It was ironic that the last ascent should have been surrounded by such fanfare, but the happy note was that we had come away from our climb leaving the tower in better condition than when we started. □

