



Le Cervin. Where it all began...

By Christopher Carey

"It is not the fortune of everyone to live in the sight of the mountains, nor is it the habit of all who dwell amidst their folding arms to seek inspiration on their topmost pinnacles. Many, indeed, who have only read of mountain climbing, consider it a waste of energy. But for all who are willing to receive their message, the glorious eternal mountains extend a silent invitation. To stroll up a hill or toil to the summit of a mountain is often to find at its uppermost vantage a new vision of life and all its possibilities. In mountaineering one enters into intimate relations with the greatest heights and depths our planet has to offer."-Leroy Jeffers (1878-1926)

Think of a mountain. Any mountain. Chances are excellent that your imaginary mountain will stand out tall and forbidding in your mind's eye: immense and ponderous, reaching up to the roof of heaven and shrouded by perpetual snow plumes borne on a relentless wind, it will be hard to visualise without feeling an attendant chill of forbidding excitement.

Mountains are the stuff of legends, the raw material of countless romantic stories about fearless adventurers who seek to know the solitary secrets of the earth's highest places. For most of us, mountains will always remain thus, merely geological phenomenon of captivating interest of which we have no greater personal experience or knowledge. But for the luckier ones among us, these majestic upper reaches of the planet's crust have a unique and singular appeal. As Leroy Jeffers noted in his lifetime of mountaineering, the expanded appreciation of life which familiarity with the high places gives us is more valuable than all the gold on earth and more precious than the rarest diamond. As a mountaineer who has maintained a lifelong love for these lofty heights, I almost pity the poor earth-bound individual who has never experienced their uniqueness and beauty in an up-close and personal way.



I recall exactly the first time I ever entertained a thought about the possibilities of attaining such things as the summits of mountains. I was an undergraduate student in Berkeley, California, and it was the late 1960s...a time when the post Bohemian awareness of San Francisco's "beat" movement was having its effect on the new generation who were seeking renewed personal enlightenment and understanding. I was an avid reader then, as I am now. One day I picked up a copy of Jack Kerouac's book, *The Dharma Bums*, and started reading it. *The Dharma Bums* is not a book about mountains, per se; rather, it is more of a narrative of personal discovery in America of the 60s and 70s...a time of social uncertainty, war, and political upheaval.

In the book, Kerouac describes how he and poet Gary Snyder (Japhy Ryder) trek back into the Sierra Nevada Mountains of California and ascend a peak known as the Matterhorn. The Sierra Matterhorn's only resemblance

to the more famous one found in Zermatt, Switzerland, is in its profile seen from directly below the Matterhorn Glacier. From that angle it does indeed resemble its namesake, with a pyramidal peak rising distinctly from the Sawtooth Ridge it occupies with several other summits, all in the 12,000 foot range.

I was immediately hooked by the image I conjured in my mind of this stairway to heaven's verge. It wasn't long before I was reading everything I could get my hands on that might indicate where precisely this mysterious peak was located in the Sierras' vast spine. After a bit of study I finally found it on a topographic map, and before long I had my gear loaded up in my old VW *kaeffer* and drove 5 hours till I was at what I suspected was the starting point for the approach hike.



That first trip was unsuccessful, largely owing to my lack of ability to use topographic maps well enough to recognize which of the many peaks in the area was the right one. The next 3 trips were similarly futile, but only in the sense that I still hadn't discovered the right peak to climb. Despite my setbacks, in the course of several months of that summer I had gained a great deal of experience with ice axe and crampons, the basic tools of the mountaineer's trade. Little did I suspect that I was on my way to becoming a die-hard mountaineer.

Finally, I succeeded in getting to the top of the right mountain. I had climbed my first mountain and it had the distinction of being the Matterhorn of the Sierras. That was the start of my life-long love of the mountains and ironically I owed it to a love of bohemian philosophy and literature. From that point on, the Matterhorn was my special mountain, just as it still is today, some 25 years later. In fact, I claimed the first ascent record for climbing the Sierra Matterhorn with a horn (a real

Matter-horn, as it were; the horn was a trombone, actually, and I wish I could have seen some of the doubtless startled faces in Yosemite's Tuolumne Meadows when they heard the strains of music wafting down from the summit one summer day). I also made the first ascent with life raft for a glissade down the Matterhorn glacier, but that's another story altogether.

In 1983, while working in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on my first of what were to be many contracts as a medical worker there, I planned a pilgrimage to Zermatt, Switzerland, site of not just the archetypal European Matterhorn itself but the birthplace of the modern sport of mountaineering. Somehow, as a mountaineer in those heady Berkeley student days, I just couldn't escape the image of that magnificent pyramid of Swiss granite that my own Sierra Matterhorn was named after. Even in the student coffee house I habituated, the Heidelberg on Telegraph Avenue, a large framed poster of the Swiss Matterhorn dominated the paintings on its walls. By this time my mountaineering library was literally bursting with information about the famous peak, as well as volumes on those early pioneers of the Golden Age of climbing in the mid-1800s. I had resolved to scale its forbidding flanks if ever I had the chance, and in 1984 that chance finally came.



If ever there were the practical equivalent for myself of what the obligatory Haj (religious pilgrimage) to Mecca is for the Islamic devout, this was it. Instead of a *Kaaba*, my holy site consisted of about 4478 vertical meters of solid Swiss granite, and instead of circling endlessly around it chanting, I was going to scale its prodigious heights and meditate silently upon its summit in my own version of communing with whatever spiritual deities may exist.

The little Valaisian town of Zermatt is a place absolutely steeped in mountaineering history, for it was here that the earliest Victorian English hill walkers came on holiday in the mid-1850s to marvel at the hitherto unscaled Swiss Alps. Perhaps it is something intrinsic in the English blood that their nation has historically figured

prominently in the annals of mountaineering; perhaps it may be attributed to the “madness” that Victorian gentlemen tended towards in their adventurous outings. Whatever it was, the English were the first to climb some of the lesser Alps in the Canton of Valais. The picturesque little alpine village of Zermatt soon attracted legions of English tourists in those early days, all eager to relax in the small town and admire the majesty of the 14,685 foot Matterhorn which loomed above--almost in the back yard of the mountain hamlet. It wasn't long before some of these gentlemen adventurers began to try to find a way up this most magnificent of the alpine peaks, but none were successful until a fellow named Edward Whymper--a lithographic artist and illustrator by profession--came along and showed everyone how to do it.



By this time (the early 1860s), the English expatriates in Zermatt had gotten together and formed the world's first mountaineering association, the English Alpine Club. Most, if not all of its members were spellbound by this daunting pyramid of stone which seemed to be unclimbable; some were of the opinion that it was foolhardy to even attempt such a climb. Nevertheless, Whymper was undeterred and began a series of reconnaissances, trying various routes on the Matterhorn's flanks. His objectives were partly to capture the beautiful scenery in a series of lithographic engravings, but always there remained his unspoken goal: to find a way to the top of the mountain's seemingly impregnable ramparts.

After many unsuccessful attempts, in June of 1865 Whymper finally succeeded, leading a group of seven persons (three other Englishmen, himself and three guides) up what is now known as the Standard Swiss Route--following the northeast ridge known as the Hörnli. The ascent was successful, attaining the top of the vaunted citadel of granite. Everything went well until the group started to descend. In one disastrous moment, just below the summit roof known as the Dachel, one of the party slipped, pulling all of the roped party towards a seemingly fatal fall over the edge and down the stark, steep 4000 foot sheer face of the Matterhorn's North Face. At the last instant, Whymper and his guides were able to arrest their slide and attempted to take the strain of the entire party.

The rope in use was not a single rope but was in fact two ropes--one a slightly smaller and weaker one joining the four others to Whymper and two guides, who were secured by the thicker, stronger one. At the moment when the full strain was taken by the rope, the section between Whymper's three and the other four parted and all save Whymper and his two guides were swept over the escarpment's lip, where they fell 4,000 feet to the glacier below.

It was a monumental tragedy, by the reckoning of those in Zermatt at that time, and it would soon become a singular source of speculation and conjecture the world over for decades to come. Thus began the enduring legend of the first successful ascent of the Matterhorn. Even today, in a time when hundreds of people of all ages, sizes and fitness regularly ascend and descend this famous mountain, the tragedy of Whymper's first ascent in 1865 inspires wonder and bemusement. Of course, mountaineering has subsequently grown into a popular world-wide phenomenon since those early days of the Victorian gentlemen explorers; but most mountaineers will still recall the fact that it all began here in Zermatt, on the Swiss Matterhorn, in 1865. Today, such early ascents pale into virtual insignificance in the shadow of such modern, almost superhuman feats of climbing accomplishment as Reinhold Messner's oxygen less alpine style solo climb of Everest; but to many of us, the Matterhorn is still the Godfather of all mountains.



My own ascent of the Swiss Matterhorn began in late 1983, with preparations and travel plans being made to visit Zermatt in the early summer of 1984. As an American member of the European Naturefreunde Touristenverein, an outdoor group dedicated to the love of the mountains (originated in the late 1800s to provide recreational opportunities for German factory workers) I knew of the existence of a NF/TVN chapter in Zermatt.



However, owing to the fact that the earliest tourist hotel in Zermatt--the Seiler Hotel Monte Rosa--was also the historical "headquarters" of the English Alpine Club, I decided to book a stay there for purely nostalgic reasons. The NF/TVN rates, as a private club, were quite modest compared to the princely sums demanded by the Seiler hotel, but I was determined to savor the ambiance of this 'watering hole' of the earliest climbers. The hotel preserves much of the original character and flavor of its late 1800s notoriety and anyone interested in the past "Golden Age" of mountaineering history ought to plan a stay at the Monte Rosa at least once on their visits to Zermatt. Although a relatively average individual possessed of ordinary means and an average income, my contract in Saudi Arabia, coming as it did at the height of the US Dollar's favorable

overseas exchange rate in '84, was enabling me to do things I had never thought I'd be able to afford. Consequently, as I felt was befitting my newfound status as a "wealthy" expatriate, I made arrangements to stay in the historic Monte Rosa for a week in early June of 1984.

Came June and I caught a flight to Genève (or Genf, as it is known in German) on Swissair from Riyadh. After a delightful overnight stay in a quaint old hotel in Geneva's Vieux Ville (Old City), I took the Schweitzer eisenbahn east, following the shores of Lac Lemán , through Montreaux and finally up the Rhône Valley to the small town of Brig/Visp, where a narrow gauge railway continues up the Zermattental (gorge) to picturesque Zermatt. The somewhat lengthy train ride is absolutely beautiful and travels through some of the most scenic vistas in all Switzerland; it is a joy in and of itself.

Finally, after a stunning ride on the cog-railway's narrow gauge train up the gorge, we pulled into Zermatt's Bahnhof, which is protected from avalanche by sturdy sheds. There, in the chill mountain air which is blessedly free of noisy motor vehicles and their noxious fumes (cars must be left lower down the mountain at a small village called Randa--the only way into Zermatt is either by helicopter, by foot, or by railway), one of the dozens of small electric shuttles picked me up and took me to the Hotel Monte Rosa. Tourism is the lifeblood of tiny Zermatt, the hamlet having no other economic means of supporting itself, and the Burgemeinde jealously preserve the natural beauty which is their birthright as well as their proverbial Golden Goose.



The next day, after spending the evening wandering about, visiting the discos, and breathing in all the quaint surroundings that constitute Zermatt, I visited the local Swiss Alpine Mountain Guides office to inquire about climbing fees and arrangements. Although anyone in reasonably good condition may aspire to hire a guide and attempt the 4,000 foot climb, the Zermatt guides are very careful to ascertain whether or not one has the ability and stamina to undertake the ascent before agreeing to take anyone aloft. Outside the window of the guide office, the frosty cathedral-like bulk of the Matterhorn's citadel looms almost unbelievably, dominating everything in the vicinity and standing starkly alone and supremely elevated above everything else around it. Just the sight of it at dawn, haunting the skyline like a mysterious specter of stone, makes the heart beat faster. The Zermatt guide office is a simple, unpretentious place on appearance. In the window are notices about rates and recreational outings offered. Inside, at the

counter, a coffee pot brews black liquid and a secretary eyes prospective clients with casual disinterest. Near the counter conversing in low tones are some of the local men, who although they don't wear apparel identifying them as guides, surely must be. The initial feeling one has is that here one is an interloper, an unknown quantity. That feeling quickly dissipates, however, as the questions begin and the answers start to come forth... One can hardly blame the native Zermatters for being a bit stand-offish by nature--after all, the places is crawling with tourists of every caliber and quality.



In the early morning at this time of the year there are usually few if any clouds circling the mountain, and it simply sits there, commanding respect and awe by its very august presence alone. Inside the guide office, the guides will quickly but completely go over the pertinent considerations of an ascent of the 4478 meter mountain with their prospective clients, and inordinate stress is usually put on what one must regard as the objective and subjective dangers of such a climb. While the ascent itself (roughly 4000 feet of 45 degree angle climbing) is not especially technically difficult, there are two factors which require some sober thinking. First, and most obvious as you look up at the expanse of the East and North Faces which lie on either side of the Hörnli Ridge, is the severe exposure involved in the climb. Each of the two faces drop steeply away to the glacial apron below without interruption. While unlikely, a fall on either side would be a long but terminal drop to infinity. Second, the fact that the Matterhorn thrusts itself up in a solitary manner, standing alone as it does on the Matterhorn plateau, creates some subjective dangers having to do with climatic conditions.

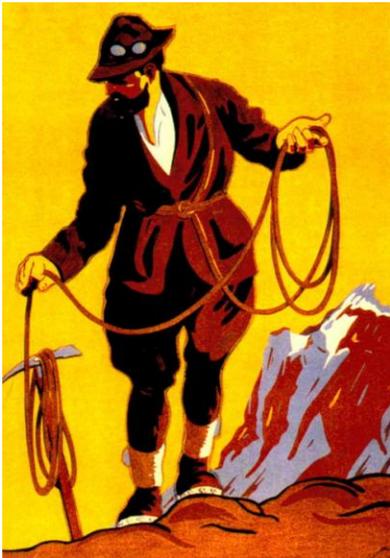
The standard ascent of the mountain via the Hörnli Ridge takes about 4 hours (depending on the fitness of the climbers), starting from the Swiss Alpine Club's Hörnlihutte. Characteristically, although the summit remains cloud-free in the early morning, by about 11 or 12 o'clock the thermal effects peculiar to the peak's mass interact with the weather to start creating a wreath of cloud around the upper third of the mountain. During the normal climbing season, this means that by noon the whole upper half of the peak is frequently completely obscured. For this reason the ascent usually begins at 4AM, so that by about 9AM the summit has been reached and descent has begun in cloud-free, high visibility conditions. The unique Alpine meteorological patterns set in motion by the Matterhorn's immense granite bulk thus create one of the most subjective potential hazards that one may encounter on the mountain.

Not surprisingly, thousands of individuals have made the ascent of the Matterhorn since that first success by Whymper in 1865. Children have done it, people in their 60s and even a few in their 70s, handicapped persons have made the climb--it is no longer the preserve of those brave elite of the mountaineering fraternity. However, due to its popularity and the fact that on any given weekend during the climbing season there may be as many as several hundred people in various stages of going up or down the Matterhorn at one time, the third most significant hazard associated with a modern ascent is rock fall. A review of the mortality statistics for the Matterhorn will reveal that rocks inadvertently dislodged by climbers have killed more people on the Matterhorn than any other cause. The fact that many people making the climb are not experienced mountaineers makes this hazard far more likely to occur, and a sturdy helmet is virtually de rigeur for everyone going up this most famous of Alpine peaks.



Lest it seem too easy, I ought to hasten to add that the ascent is physically arduous owing to the high altitude involved and the vertical elevation of the Matterhorn (14,685 feet / 4478 meters). Only individuals in very good condition ought to make the climb. This fact notwithstanding, many people make the climb that are not especially fit or well-toned. Still, for those who wish to experience this unique bit of mountaineering history, the spectacular

scenery and the views from the summit of the Swiss Matterhorn are all worth the effort, many times over. And there is that singularly special feeling of spiritual identification and integration with this mountaineering 'holy place' that one feels after having scaled its imposing heights.



My chat with the guides provided all this information and much more, for they are admirably serious about wanting to assure the safety of their clients. Furthermore, no mountain guide genuinely enjoys being stuck high up on a mountain such as this with an incapacitated or otherwise hors de combat client, whom he must safely get down again. In the event of the need for such a rescue effort, there is a unique organisation based in Zermatt called Air Zermatt. Owned by certain members of the Zermatt Burgemeinde, Air Zermatt is a high altitude helicopter service which provides, in addition to high altitude mountain rescue, other things such as helicopter rides above and around the famous mountain and ski access to some of the higher ski areas in the region. So skilled are the pilots of Air Zermatt that injured climbers have been plucked off the very summit itself, provided the weather is tolerable. For their work they use specially adapted high-altitude French Alouette III helicopters that are designed to fly more efficiently in the thinner than usual air. Their collective rescue exploits make for some exciting reading. Former Air Zermatt Chief Pilot Siegfried Stangier's account of his own career as a rescue helicopter pilot (Retter, Die von Himmel Kommt!) is highly recommended, although it is not available in English. As an aviation person, I had ample opportunity to interview author Sigi during the course of

my climbing visit in 84, and managed to overfly the Matterhorn's summit several times with him to get a feel for the nature of his risky work in the treacherous air currents that are created by the Matterhorn. Working with the Swiss Alpine Club and REGA, the Swiss national helicopter rescue service, Air Zermatt has saved the lives of countless climbers over the past 40 years. Hopefully, you won't have to observe their professional expertise at work from close proximity, but it certainly is a nice feeling knowing that such last-ditch measures are available, should the unthinkable occur high up on the Matterhorn's granite flanks!

After meeting with the guides and inquiring as to prices and logistics, they were satisfied by my own background and experience in mountain climbing techniques and a date was made to go up. The cost, at the time, was about SFr 500 for guide and services (10 years later, the cost is more like US \$ 500 for the same experience--inflation!). In the event of someone wanting to go up who has never climbed before, but who is otherwise in excellent condition, a practice climb or two is usually arranged first on a nearby peak such as the Breithorn or the Riffelhorn. Once the guides are satisfied as to the ability of the prospective climber (lacking evidence of previous experience in the mountains), an ascent is scheduled for the Matterhorn itself--weather permitting, although conditions are invariably good most of the time during the standard climbing season.

Several days later, the time for my date with this peak of my childhood dreams was at hand. We left in the evening of the day immediately proceeding the ascent, taking the Luftseilbahn (cable car) from Zermatt to the upper terminal at the Schwarzsee; from there, carrying climbing packs and ropes we hiked the final thousand feet to the Swiss Alpine Club hut known as the Hörnlihutte (situated at 3260 meters). There we spent the night after enjoying a hearty meal and some camaraderie with others and their guides, also en route the next day.



At 4 AM sharp my guide was up, getting his gear together. I had no trouble awakening since I hadn't slept a wink the entire night--a combination of excitement and the usual difficulty I have getting any sleep at high altitude the first day or so of any mountain trip. We had a quick breakfast of muesli and instant oatmeal and were soon out

on the ridge above the hut, trying to get ahead of the other groups who were a bit slower or larger than ours, so as to free ourselves of the exaggerated but realistic concern over rock fall.

The views by now were stunning, as they are in fact even from the Hörnlihutte itself. The air was cold and crisp and the skies were absolutely crystal clear, despite the early hour. We made good time up the 45 degree ridge, since hand and foot holds are excellent and both of us were in top shape. Within several hours we had made it all the way up to the Solvayhutte, a high altitude mountain refuge at 13,210 feet which is small but provides



excellent emergency accommodations for anyone unfortunate enough to need them. After a rest there for food, water and some sober gazing at the seemingly sheer drop on all sides of the Solvayhutte's doorway, we were back up at it again; it occurred to me that one had to be careful about taking a trip out of the hut to relieve one's self at night, since the doorstep of the hut is about the size of a large postage stamp! Heading up once more, the route veered briefly out onto the East Face as the route zagged higher to the permanent snowfield that covers the Dachel, or roof. Below us, the others were still struggling up and having no one ahead of us conveyed a great sense of satisfaction that whatever rock fall occurred would be minimal and not man-instigated.

Finally, the skies were starting to get quite light. Unclipping from a section of fixed rope attached to one of the more spectacular sections of exposed rock, we tracked up the Dachel's icy snowfield using crampons and ice axes to the final summit ridge. The sense one has at this point of being perched absurdly high up in the sky, with the ground falling away on all sides, is quite breath-taking. I paused, just short of what is known as the South Summit (slightly lower than the North Summit) to reflect on the drama which eternally embroiled Whymper and his fellow Victorian climbers in historic climbing speculation on that

day in June, back in 1865. Having read a great deal about all this some years before, I could vividly imagine what it must have felt like for them. It left me with a chilled sense of awe and wonder, as I mused on what they had accomplished with little more than their determination, and the primitive gear and clothing of that time.

Then it was on to the North, or "true" Summit, which is at the far end of a rocky spine with icy patches in the perpetually frozen crannies of the summit rocks. The true high point of the Matterhorn is adorned with a filigreed iron summit cross, in the style of all the well frequented Alpine summits. The cross commemorates the lives of all those who have been killed attempting to do what we had successfully done and is a product of the deeply devout beliefs of the very Catholic people who live in the high alpine hamlets of this region.

It took a few minutes to realise what I had done. I had made it to the top of the Matterhorn, finally. I had made it to the summit of my life-long goal: Angels 146, as an air traffic controller would term the altitude in aviation parlance--Angels 146 on the doorstep of Heaven. It was indeed 'heaven' to me, and as the first party to make the ascent that beautiful day, we had a bit more peace and quiet in which to appreciate the singular beauty that this high and historic vantage offers than those following would have. It was amusing to think about how frequently I had routinely been this high in an aircraft; but what a different feeling it was to be here with both feet firmly planted on the earth! Soon, the summit would be crowded and noisy as all the dozens who were now struggling up the route finally reached their objective. I was alone with my thoughts for a



while, but then it was time to grab a few photographs of my guide and myself and head back down before the gaggle of tyros burst upon us and shattered the rare and beautiful mood of the legendary place.



The descent was just as demanding as the ascent, owing to the fact that different muscle groups are used going down. Further, according to statistics, it is on the descent that most mountaineering accidents occur, due to fatigue and a somewhat lessened state of focus (this was the case on Whymper's successful first ascent!). Now the concern for rock fall was again fresh, as we passed group after group following the track towards the top of the mountain. Finally, however, we reached the Solvayhutte where we paused again, and then continued on down to the Hörnihutte, where we had lunch on the hut's deck. Above us climbers were

visible all along the ridge, and it made one pause to ponder just how routine the ascent of this once impregnable mountain fortress had become. Finally, I folded up my tiny Zeiss Trinovid binoculars and we trudged back down the path to the Schwartzsee leftseilbahn terminal for the ride down to Zermatt, which was waiting for us at an elevation of 5315 feet AMSL below the Matterhorn massif.

It had been--if I can be excused the pun--one of the peak experiences of my life, and certainly a memorable one. One of the great goals of my life had been attained. To paraphrase Neil Armstrong's immortal words as he set foot for the first time on the moon, "It may be a small step for mankind, but it's a giant step for this man."

What had started many years ago, with a book written by Jack Kerouac about the self discovery of the post-Beat generation, had culminated in my finally fulfilling a personally enriching dream that had been an important part of my whole life up to this point. A figurative milestone had been reached. An accomplishment of no small personal meaning.



The rest of my stay in Zermatt was less arduous and no less enriching, but there is so much to see in this historic little Alpine recreation area that the remaining days passed quickly. Such sights as the Alpine Museum, the English (Anglican) Church, the

interesting graveyard in which many famous (and not so famous) climbers have been laid to rest over the years, and the frenetic night-life with underground discos and tourist watering-holes--all were enjoyable and memorable experiences. The spirited sense of good feeling and pleasure that the area inspires is unique and invigorating--even if you don't aspire to scale the peaks.



But nothing...nothing...can compare with the silent glory of standing up there on the roof of the world, listening to the chill wind keen with stories of climbers long gone and relishing that moment of personal triumph, which for me shall remain long in my memory.....standing there on the doorstep of heaven at *Angels 146*...