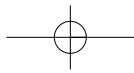


FERCE BEAUTY: Climber Ermanno Salvaterra scales the north face of 10,262-foot Cerro Torre, in southern Patagonia.



THE LEGEND ROARS

A landmark ascent of Patagonia's daunting Cerro Torre rekindles one of exploration's greatest controversies

INTRODUCTION BY DAVID ROBERTS
INTERVIEW BY CHARLIE BUFFET
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THE LEGENDARY FRENCH ALPINIST LIONEL TERRAY called it “the greatest mountaineering feat of all time.” • But did it even happen? • On February 3, 1959, having been out of touch with his teammates for six days, an exhausted Cesare Maestri rappelled off 10,262-foot Cerro Torre, a fierce pinnacle of ice and granite in Argentine Patagonia that has been called the hardest mountain in the world. Three days earlier, the Italian claimed, he and his Austrian teammate Toni Egger had reached the summit. But Egger died on the descent when an avalanche swept him off the mountain during a rappel. With Egger, Maestri said, went the pair's

only camera and the photographs that might have proved their accomplishment.

The doubts surfaced at once. Though Maestri and Egger were world-class alpinists, the mountain's northeast face and north ridge looked far more formidable than anything climbed to that date anywhere in the world. And the speed of their purported ascent, through a week of consistently bad weather, seemed equally improbable. If the skeptics are right, the route Terray hailed as the greatest climb of all time was first accomplished just this past November, in a brilliant thrust by three Italians—two of them, ironically, friends of the now 76-year-old Maestri.

Indeed, 47 years after the supposed first ascent, the Cerro Torre enigma will not go away. Whether Maestri faked his climb of the hardest mountain has become the most bitterly disputed exploratory controversy of the past half-century. In 1991, film director Werner Herzog, with legendary climber Reinhold Messner as his consultant and writer, wove a fictional film, *Schrei aus Stein—Scream of Stone*, loosely around Maestri's Cerro Torre climb.

For nearly 50 years, Maestri has railed against his detractors, sticking doggedly to his story of the groundbreaking ascent. And though he has managed to retain a handful of stalwart supporters, the vast majority of experts still consider the climb a hoax.

In 1970, an attempt to end the rabid debate backfired when Maestri returned to the mountain to climb its opposite flank in the worst possible style, wielding a gasoline-powered compressor gun to nail a ladder of some 400 bolts up the southeast ridge. Even so, Maestri was stopped 150 feet short of Cerro Torre's summit by a “mushroom cap” of airy snow-ice.

In the austral summer of 1976, three Americans making the first ascent of neighboring Torre Egger climbed some 8,500 feet to the Col of Conquest, the V-notch that separates the two peaks (see map on page 80), thereby repeating the first half of Maestri and Egger's alleged route. After coming across abundant climbing gear left by their predecessors on the first thousand feet, they were shocked to find absolutely nothing—not a single piton or bolt—beyond that point. The Americans suspected that the 1959 duo had climbed only the lowest quarter of the towering mountain, not even reaching the Col of Conquest (above which Maestri claims that he and Egger had bivouacked on both the ascent and the descent).

Meanwhile, the full Maestri-Egger route remained unrepeated, despite more than ten attempts over the years by some of the finest climbers in the world. Then, last November 13, Alessandro Beltrami, 24, Rolando Garibotti, 35, and Ermanno Salvaterra, 51, climbed the northeast face and north ridge to the summit, pulling off one of the boldest ascents ever accomplished in Patagonia. On the upper part of the mountain, they found no trace of Maestri and Egger's passage, though Maestri said he drove 60 bolts above the Col of Conquest, where the most extreme climbing begins.

If Maestri has been untruthful all these years, then the real first ascent of Cerro Torre came only in 1974, when four Italians from Lecco, led by Casimiro Ferrari, forged their way up the west face. Ferrari's team found some of the very hardest climbing on the icy mushroom cap that Maestri had dismissed after his 1970 climb as “not really part of the mountain.” In any event, the 1974 ascent, itself years ahead of its time, remains perhaps the most undervalued achievement in Patagonian annals.

In January 2006, French mountaineer and journalist Charlie Buffet, who speaks fluent Italian, called Maestri at his home, in Madonna di Campiglio, Italy. What follows is a partial transcript of that explosive interview—one of the first published since the route on which Maestri staked his enduring reputation was repeated. Throughout the exchange, the Italian climber avoids answering Buffet's pointed questions, even as he lashes out, spewing obscenities against a world that he insists has done him wrong. In this single phone conversation, Maestri cavalierly dismisses his rivals and belittles other great climbers—but then, in a startling moment, seems to imply that his climb was a hoax: “What I did was the most important endeavor in the world. I did it single-handedly. But this doesn't mean that I . . . that I reached the top. . . .”

A slip of the tongue? If so, the truth at last? Or Maestri's final, spiteful joke on the critics who, as he says, “ruined my life”?

How do you respond to the climbers who, last fall, ascended Cerro Torre and now question the validity of your climb? You mean Ermanno Salvaterra? I didn't take legal action against him for libel because I didn't want to damage mountaineering. Let me clarify: I fight on principle. If they don't believe me, if they question my climb, then I question the whole of mountaineering.

What do you mean by that? If my climbs are scrutinized, then I must question all great solo



Italian climber
Cesare Maestri

“They can invent what they want—pitons, no pitons, I couldn’t care less. What I did was the most important endeavor in the world. I did it single-handedly.”

climbs. I must question all of Messner’s climbs, all solos—I question everything.

Are you saying that one should always believe the climber? Obviously. But not for my sake. Who can prove to me that Messner reached the summit of Everest?

Messner took a picture. I don’t give a [expletive]! You know very well that photos can be faked. Photos don’t prove anything.

Between you and me, Messner is a true [expletive]. He saw Cerro Torre only when he made that flop of a Herzog movie. He saw it from a distance in a helicopter. One day I told him, “You see, Messner, the ones who bad-mouth Cerro Torre are guys like you, who were not able to reach the top.” So he should shut up because if he questions my climb, I question his whole activity, which is not as clean as it looks.

Salvatera says he didn’t find any bolts or traces of your passage above the Col of Conquest. They are conducting a campaign against me in the press, so now I will sue them for libel and slander. Because I am tired, I have had it up to here, and I am fed up. They ruined my life.

How do you explain the controversy surrounding 1959? It is created by all those sons of bitches. I am not a son of a bitch. In my life, in my whole life, I never told a lie. Everyone knows I am sincere, I am loyal, I never tried to destroy someone in order to make headlines. I made headlines because I was the strongest solo climber in the world. Do you understand?

Can I ask you a specific question? How do you explain that there are no bolts on or above the Col of Conquest? Listen very carefully: When we attacked it in 1959, the north face of Cerro Torre was a solid mass of snow and ice. We went up it. Egger was the greatest ice climber in the world. We took advantage of this because the weather had been bad for three weeks and Cerro Torre was a sheet of ice. . . .

[Maestri reels off a string of obscenities.] But I don’t give a [expletive] about all this. It has already been covered, goddamn it to hell! You can’t understand.

So how did you safeguard your climb during your ascent? We dug a hole in the ice, laid an ax horizontally inside, fixed a little rope to it, then covered it with snow and ice until the hole was as full as a glass.

I’ve never heard of anyone using that technique on such a severe incline. What about the descent? For one, we put in pitons. We took advantage of cracks full of ice. We also put in about eight expansion bolts, because we did 120-meter [394-foot] rappels on doubled ropes. It’s almost impossible, on a one-kilometer-high face, to find a single pair of bolts. If they don’t want to believe me, then we must question the whole of mountaineering. This is my stand, but not for me alone: If we don’t believe one climber, we don’t believe anyone. Do you understand my point?

In your book, do you write about this line of pitons? I don’t have to explain anything; I don’t owe anything to anyone. They can invent what they want—pitons, no pitons, I couldn’t care less. What I did was the most important endeavor in the world. I did it single-handedly. But this doesn’t mean that I . . . that I reached the top, do you understand? Do I make myself clear?

No, I don’t understand. You’ve said that you left a can on the summit? What do you think, that after 50 years you can find a can? Come on! Do you expect that something will be found there? I couldn’t care less; they can believe me, not believe me, I don’t care. I base it all on the principle that if we question one climb—not mine, any climb at all—we need to question all of mountaineering.

You know that a lot of people in mountaineering would understand if you had not gone to the top, for various reasons, maybe because Egger died? What the hell do you want me to say?

Let me finish. Even given that you might not have reached the summit, nothing would change the fact that you are still a great climber. I don’t accept this. I absolutely repudiate it. Why don’t you climb up there? With Salvatera and that [expletive] [Garibotti]! Go up and look. You will understand.

[Shortly after this comment, with a breezy, “Good-bye, thanks,” Maestri hangs up.] ▲



▲ **AN INDUBITABLE FIRST:** The November 13, 2005, Cerro Torre climb was the first confirmed first-ascent done in lightweight style and on the peak’s northern side. The team ascended via Maestri’s 1959 route and descended by his 1970 Compressor Route.

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

Fresh from his Cerro Torre climb, Rolando Garibotti weighs in on the debate

As an alpinist, I was intimately familiar with the 1959 Cesare Maestri controversy long before I climbed the north flank of Cerro Torre this past November. Maestri’s ascent was, at the time, light-years ahead of any other climbing feat—besting even Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay’s 1953 ascent of Everest. It was so impressive, in fact, that even as the public celebrated the young Italian as a hero, the climbing community questioned the veracity of his climb, using Maestri’s own descriptions of the route to cast doubt on the ascent.

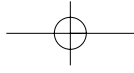
In three different magazine articles published between 1959 and 1961, Maestri recounted three very different routes above the Col of Conquest. Today nearly all of the terrain he described in those articles has been climbed and no trace of his passage has been found, despite Maestri’s claims that he placed 60 bolts above the col. (Our team found a number of Maestri’s pitons on the first 900 feet, but none above that.) Further, while Maestri’s descriptions of the mountain’s lower section are extremely detailed, his notes for the upper portion,

the climb’s most difficult part, are vague and inaccurate. For instance, Maestri has described the route’s final wall as having a 45- to 50-degree tilt, but our team—and those before us—found the terrain nearly vertical. To nonclimbers it may sound improbable that our group or any other could locate Maestri’s exact route. But on a climb as difficult as the north face of the Torre, there are only a few natural lines—cracks, flakes, and grooves in the rock—leading to the top. To increase the odds of a successful climb, an alpinist will follow the best of these routes, picking his

or her way up the path of least resistance. The best route to the top of Cerro Torre, then, is the same today as it was in 1959.

How does this controversy end? For me, by giving credit where credit is due: After standing atop Cerro Torre, I am convinced that Italians Daniele Chiappa, Mario Conti, Casimiro Ferrari, and Pino Negri, not Maestri, were the first to reach the peak when, on January 13, 1974, they completed their ascent of the west face. History has yet to give this expedition its rightful place. It is my hope that now, finally, it will. —R.G.

GRAPHIC OVERLAY BY ROBERT DUMVILLE



SNOW GLOBE: Salvaterra scales one of three "mushroom caps" of snow and ice that impeded his path to Cerro Torre's summit. He, Rolando Garibotti, and Alessandro Beltrami climbed the peak on November 13, 2005.

