

From the Clouds: Torlano and Blair Claim Yosemite First Descent

Contributed by David Crothers

This January, Yosemite ski pioneer Jason Torlano and partner Jonathan Blair claimed a first descent of Clouds Rest, a 3,000-foot rock face in Yosemite National Park.

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John Muir wrote in his book, *The Yosemite*, “Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.” Muir explored the valley when there was no rock-climbing culture or tourist traffic jams—it was a landscape few had visited and he laid down many of the first tracks throughout the valley. Jason Torlano is doing the same thing, only with skis on his feet. This January, Torlano, 37, skied Clouds Rest, a 3,000-foot rock face in Yosemite National Park.

Throughout the last 20 years, Torlano, a former Army paratrooper in the 173rd Airborne Brigade who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, has been skiing first descents in Yosemite National Park. He started skiing the steepest terrain as a teenager under the wing of Yosemite skiing pioneer Tim Messick and has been seeking out and making first descents in the park ever since. This January, Torlano made the first ski descent on the 60-degree face of Clouds Rest (9,926 feet) in a remote corner of Yosemite.

Jonathan Blair Descending the Upper Snowfield. [Photo] Jason Torlano

Torlano climbed one of the routes on Clouds Rest a few years ago and says that’s when he knew it could be skied if conditions were right. During the winter, the steep, slabby granite faces of Clouds Rest can hold enough snow to be skiable. Otherwise, they’re caked with ice. But after skiing a first descent on Quarter Dome, located between Clouds Rest and Half Dome, Torlano saw the snow cover on Clouds Rest and, he says, new it was time.

Torlano and his partner, Jonathan Blair of South Lake Tahoe, headed out for what would be the most challenging run either of them had ever skied. “It was like survival skiing,” Torlano says. “There were no-falls zones for most of the descent. It was pretty icy and the snow had been pretty wind affected.” It took the pair 12 hours just to get to the summit ridge, where they spent the night. The following morning they skied from the top of Clouds Rest to Mirror Lake—nearly 6,000 feet—and rappelled just fewer than 500 feet of the descent. It took more than seven hours. “We were skiing before the sun came up because it was supposed to be 50 degrees that day and wanted to get off the slopes before it warmed up. But it ended up taking us all day anyway,” Torlano says.

Torlano currently has 28 first ski descent in the park with another on his agenda for this winter. He’s got his sights on another chute on Quarter Dome—he’s just waiting for favorable conditions. “There’s one more beautiful chute left on Quarter Dome that looks really good,” Torlano says, “I am just waiting for it to snow again.”

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