REACHING NEW HEIGHTS

The Tomasi brothers aren't famous — not like the Wright Brothers or the Doobie Brothers. In and around the Grand Canyon, though, they're making a name for themselves as they try to conquer 100 summits in a canyon that isn't always conquerable. On a recent trip, they attempted one more.

WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY LARRY LINDAHL

CONQUERING THE CANYON **Brothers Pernell (left) and Aaron Tomasi survey the Grand Canyon from Shiva Temple, staging their ascent of Claude Birdseye Point. It will be Pernell's 79th and Aaron's 76th climb of 100 Canyon summits they hope to conquer.**

"ANOTHER DAY in Paradise," Aaron Tomasi jokes while lightning silently explodes in the epicenter of a raging summer monsoon.

Heavy clouds begin to circle us in an ominously large spiral as Tuba City, to the east, gets pelted under dark curtains of rain. Aaron, his brother Pernell, and I study the storm's movement, watching from the 7,646-foot summit of Shiva Temple, the largest of the Grand Canyon's buttes.

Aaron, 40, peers at the sky, his blond hair blowing in the wind. A former U.S. Army paratrooper, he now drives a truck delivering packages in Flagstaff. Pernell, 35, lives in faster-paced Tempe. As a scientist, he studies plant genetics, but his penetrating gaze and short, dark hair give him the look of a 1950s hot-rod racer.

Year after year, the Tomasi brothers challenge this unforgiving terrain of crumbly, sharp-edged desert stone as they reach ever closer to conquering 100 summits in the Canyon. Tomorrow they plan to add one more.

As the hours pass, the monsoon's engine slowly stalls, and the clouds dissolve harmlessly into the cathedral sky. Perhaps tomorrow the heat and tropical moisture will power itself into a tempest of destruction, but for now, we walk with a sense of relief to the edge of the cliffs, and wait for the fire of sunset.

We talk about climbing ridges farther out in the Canyon, with the Colorado River thousands of feet below us, on our quest to climb the summit of Claude Birdseye Point. We gaze at the 6,975-foot summit as rock ledges and cliffs begin to gild in divine light. Our route is still uncertain. Walking back to camp, Aaron lists the people — fewer than a half-dozen — who have climbed to the top of Claude Birdseye Point.

Stars and planets slowly emerge while he coaxes a haunting song from his harmonica. He casually points out the constellation Scorpius, and then its brightest star, Antares, glowing orange-red in its heart. We plan to sleep on top of Shiva Temple — an overnight stay on a summit is a first for both of them.

"Know when to turn back," the Tomasi brothers wrote in their 2001 book, *Grand Canyon Summits Select: An obscure compilation of sixty-nine remote ascent routes in the Grand Canyon National Park backcountry.* "It might take two, three or more attempts before you climb the thing. That's OK."

So why are we here in the heat and danger of summer monsoon season?

The answer is simple: We needed a supplemental water source somewhere along the way to reach the summit of Claude Birdseye Point. At 8 pounds per gallon, and a gallon needed for each day, the sheer weight of water necessary for the four-day hike would make this endeavor impossible.

Summer storms often hide water in remote rain pools high on ridges, but they also throw deadly spears of lightning. During cooler times of the year, shorter daylight hours limit hiking time, rain pools might be dry, and access to the North Rim closes due to snow from November to May.

The opportunity to line up all the cards, hoping for the ace of hidden water in the deal, is rare. Timing is everything.

BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING **Isis Temple (left) peeks out from amid the greenery on Shiva saddle. After checking the summit off their lists, Pernell Tomasi (above, right) rappels down Shiva Temple, and leads the way (right) up the summit of Claude Birdseye Point.**

BLASTS FROM THE PAST **Pernell Tomasi (left) inspects an old milk can at the summit registry of Shiva Temple. A 1937 sign (above) at the junction between Tiyo Point and Shiva Temple was charred in a lightning-sparked fire.**

Dutton's fascination with mythology gave rise to his choosing several other Hindu-inspired names, including Vishnu Temple (7,533 feet) and Brahma Temple (7,553 feet). Then, in 1923, his exotic names got the final stamp of approval when the chief topographic engineer for the U.S. Geological Survey placed them on the official map. The engineer had also surveyed Mount Rainier and the crater of Kilauea in Hawaii. His name was Claude Birdseye.

EXTENDING OUT FROM the North Rim, our route traversed an unnamed ridge, and then steeply descended to a saddle where we camped our first night. As sunset quickly approached, we searched for water until we wondered if our quest could continue.

Losing daylight, we unsuccessfully explored the rocky spine. Finally, we discovered a 2-inch-deep puddle tucked in an outcrop of etched Supai sandstone. The scant puddle provided unappetizing algae-choked green-brown water, but it was our only source.

Ignoring the color, we filtered the water into containers, stocking up a two-day supply to carry with us, and an additional cache for our return. In a few hot days, the puddle would be history, so we were grateful to draw the ace we needed.

The next morning, scrambling up the north-facing cliffs, our thighs burned as we hauled our heavy packs and fought our way through breaks in the towering Coconino sandstone into the sharp Kaibab limestone, and then, onto the summit of Shiva Temple.

Pernell removed the rock-slab lid covering one of two large milk cans marking the summit. These cans were air-dropped here by parachute during an infamous "first-ascent" expedition by the American Museum of Natural History in 1937 (when scientists found tomato cans and film canisters left by recent visitors). Pernell pulled out the summit register, and we each signed in.

Crossing the length of the 300-acre summit, we came upon the remains of yet another wildfire. Local news had reported the fire burning less than a month before our visit. We tried to guess where the lightning had struck, and how the small fire had moved across the land.

In Hinduism, powerful and fierce Shiva is the destroyer — the deity destroys so he can re-create or transform. Interestingly enough, when forest fires burn, they invigorate the soil to release nitrogen, a natural fertilizer. Monsoon rains also bring nitrogen to the soil, and lupines, a plant in the pea family, sprout from the ash, putting nitrogen back into the soil as well.

"A healthy forest," Pernell observed.

AFTER A WARM night, morning dawns early on Shiva Temple, so we lose no time getting the hike started toward Claude Birdseye Point. We hunt for a gap down the cliffs and use precious time finding it. Our finite supply of water is a ticking clock in the hot summer sun. But soon we are on our way down, clinging to steep ledges, skirting 100-foot drop-offs, and traversing chunky "moon dust."

We halt above a sheer cliff before Aaron finds a stout juniper. He signals to his brother after safely securing the 10mm climbing rope around the tree. With military precision, Pernell disappears backward over the 35-foot limestone precipice. And down we scramble.

Connecting Shiva Temple to the craggy summit of Claude Birdseye Point is a knife-edged fin of sandstone slabs. Here we discover sharp-clawed fossil tracks. And shortly afterward, a large slab shifts under my weight. Finally, we reach the base of Claude Birdseye Point, and the brothers assess our situation.

Aaron, having broken his collarbone in a mountain-biking accident just nine weeks before the hike, uses caution and lets Pernell lead the way. Pernell secures the rope for us as he pulls his body like an animal up the exposed fissure.

Climbing the cliff myself, I drive my knee into solid rock on the last overhang. Pain throbs into the joint, and then at the summit, it seems to vanish within the infinite panorama of the Grand Canyon's buttes and spires. The brothers point them out by name, and I scribble in my notebook a list of more than 30 summits, including the many they've climbed.

Peering across to Osiris Temple at 6,637 feet, they plot a future route to its peak up craggy, deep shadows, and log the information. Aaron searches for the Claude Birdseye Point summit register. None exists, so I donate an old film canister and a page from my tiny notebook. Aaron scrawls a short message, adds his name and date, and then hands it to Pernell. One more summit is triumphantly checked off their list.

As I stand on top of the world, a mysterious feeling takes hold. Perhaps this unspoken sensation of insignificance and empowerment is what inspires Aaron and Pernell to try to climb 100 summits. We begin our descent, bringing to a close our time in this rarefied place between heaven and Earth while thunderheads once again break the horizon. AH

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OUR ROUTE TO Claude Birdseye Point from Shiva Temple had begun off the rough dirt road leading to Point Sublime on the North Rim. After parking near a forest of aspens, Douglas firs and towering ponderosa pines, we followed an abandoned two-track road 3 miles to a junction.

There, tacked to a tree, two old signs point left to Tiyo Point, and right to Shiva Temple. Just last year, a lightning-ignited wildfire swept this forest, scorching everything in its path. The hand-painted metal signs carry the story of destruction in their fire-seared patina.

Acrid-smelling ash permeates everything. Charcoal-black tree trunks stand over mazes of fallen logs. After trudging 3 more miles through the devastated landscape, we caught our first glimpse of Shiva Temple rising 4,000 feet from its base.

"In all the vast space beneath and around us there is very little upon which the mind can linger restfully," wrote U.S. Geological Survey geologist and explorer Clarence Dutton. "It is completely filled with objects of gigantic size and amazing form, and as the mind wanders over them, it is hopelessly bewildered and lost."

In 1880, he named Shiva Temple, describing it as "the grandest of all the buttes, and the most majestic in aspect."

SUMMIT UP **Pernell signed the summit registry (left) at Shiva Temple. The Tomasi brothers set their sights on Claude Birdseye Point (right), named after an engineer for the U.S. Geological Survey.**