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The Campanile caper

By Walt Davie '54

*"Hail to California
Queen in whom we're blest
Spreading light and goodness
Over all the West"*

--C.R. "Brick" Morse

Amen to the "spreading light" part of the verse. I was standing right under the figurative source--the giant 1,000-watt light bulb inside the chandelier at the Campanile's summit hung just over my head. It was 1 a.m. The campus slumbered beneath me as I secretly congratulated myself. It is not often that a mountaineer is able to reach a summit from within.



Illustration by Dan Hubig

In the fall of 1949 I was a naïve initiate of Bowles Hall, the University's Tudor castle on a hill. The student routine was all new to me, a young electrical engineering student from the small agricultural town of Tracy.

Gene Whitney and Bill Loughman, pre-med roommates at Bowles, introduced me to the UC Glee Club and the UC Hiking Club--groups which became two of my true loves. The Glee Club provided an outlet for one's musical aspirations. (The Treble Clef, UCGC's women's section, provided opportunities to meet attractive coeds.) The hiking club provided adventure.

Together with fellow Bowlesman Bob Gardener, we made long weekend pilgrimages to Yosemite. The UHC would gather sleeping bags, muster ropes, and climb the rock walls. One evening around the campfire, Bob produced a small volume entitled *The Night Climbers of Cambridge*. It seemed that Cambridge students, having a dearth of local mountains, had taken to climbing their campus buildings under cover of darkness. This inspired us into a flurry of activity.

A small campus map was placed on the wall of the hiking club office. Each major building had a red stickpin emplaced, like darts on a dart board, to represent those which had not been climbed. We would gather in small groups after midnight, dressed in drab WWII surplus clothing, at the base of various reconnoitered campus structures. As each edifice was conquered, the red pins were replaced by green.

We went through Roman and Greek periods. There was an airy peripheral jaunt around a two-foot-wide ledge on the outside of Memorial Stadium. The only tricky part was directly behind the two scoreboards, where the ledge narrowed to about six inches. Similarly, the Doe Library traverse was complicated by the necessity of straddling the gargoyles over the front entrance. On the Greek Theatre climb, convenient eye-bolts at the top of the stage columns provided rope-belay anchors for the perilous move over the column tops.

And so it went. Green pins blossomed every week or so on the campus map. At last, only the magnificent Venetian symbol of the University, the Campanile itself, remained stubbornly in the red.

After various discussions on the subject, it was determined that scaling the Campanile would involve defacing the granite façade with climbing hardware; we decided a rappel down the outside would qualify for the green pin. It was not a matter to undertake haphazardly. The challenge required careful advance planning in matters of entry, reconnaissance, technique, communication, and verification.

The 1914 *Blue and Gold* revealed that the visitor's platform was 208 feet above ground level. Thus our first concern: The normal climbing rope was a mere 120 feet, and we had insufficient funds for anything longer. Our decision to tie two ropes together led to a second problem: The carabiner, which stabilized the additional safety sling we used on long descents, would not be able to pass over the knot.

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Loughman came up with the solution--a two-sling method that would allow us to hop the carabiner over the knot in complete safety. We practiced at Indian Rock, the local climbing venue in North Berkeley, making rappels with knots until we were comfortable with the arrangement. We then made a number of descents with eyes closed to simulate the darkness of night.

Access to the tower was our next concern.

One fine fall afternoon, I walked down to the Campanile, paid the ten-cent fee, and went up the elevator. The operator controlled the cage with a walnut-handled trolleyman's rheostat; a row of numbered conventional push-buttons designated the intermediate floors.

We arrived at the open-air visitor's platform (this was many years before it was enclosed by glass). There, in the middle of the observation gallery, was the glass booth where carillonneur Margaret Murdoch '24 played the noon-hour concert. (My mother, Dorothy '23, had told me about the bell-ringer's role in the 1923 Berkeley Fire, which devastated the north side of campus. As panicked students threw their belongings out the windows, Murdoch ascended the Campanile and repeatedly played "Scotland's Burning" as an alarm to the campus community.)

Taking stock of the gallery's layout, I noted that the chest-high railing provided a firm anchor for the rappel. An outside ledge would make a convenient toehold for starting the descent. Doing so in the dark of the moon would also be a good idea, I thought. I also noted a small door which, I surmised, gave access to the upper belfry and summit pyramid.

But Lady Rapunzel was not going to lower her golden tresses to give us nocturnal access to the tower. We were going to need a key. Such fabrication was beyond my technical ability, so we would have to go to the place where Louie dwells.

Louie Mittelman was a fellow engineering student and partner in various campus pranks. Dressed in the protective coloration of a 1950s engineer--gray khakis, faded blue shirt, and scuffed leather shoes--he always wore his holster, loaded with a Keuffel & Esser log log duplex decitrig slide rule.

Few technical prank possibilities escaped Louie's notice. Noisy Bowlesmen were apt to be plagued with plumbing shutoffs or mysterious electrical anomalies. And Louie was a master of elevator tricks, a retribution that could be accomplished in the anonymity he cherished. He rewired the pushbuttons in the Bowles Hall elevator such that it stopped at random floors, and reprogrammed the scheme every few days. His most severe trick was reserved for particular late-night revelers whose sheets were to the wind. Louie would rush to the elevator control room. Once the victim was in the elevator, Louie would take over the elevator as if it were a theme park ride, orchestrating the mechanical relays like an organist gone mad.

I placed before Louie my need for a way to access the Campanile. "I can make you a key," he replied with utmost discretion, "if you promise never to reveal my name as being involved." I agreed. Louie would become our Rapunzel.

So Louie and I met at the Campanile and, after a tour group had ascended, we looked at the open door. He showed me how the lock cylinder could be loosened so that it could later be removed.

That night, Bob Gardener and I made a midnight visit to the tower. With a little urging, the lock cylinder came unscrewed. Gardener, who was the more fleet of foot, raced the cylinder back to Bowles Hall, where the midnight oil was burning in Louie's room. With his green eyeshade, study lamp, and black velvet watchmaker's pad, and using a variety of miniature tools, Louie performed legerdemain. We rushed back at about 2 a.m. and reinstalled the lock.

Louie's fabrication, a golden key (brass, actually), held the power of Rapunzel's golden tresses. The way to the tower lay before us!

A week later, Bob Gardener and I performed a final reconnaissance. Just after midnight, we zigzagged out of the esplanade foliage. I extracted the key from my pocket as we approached the door. We opened it quietly and slipped inside. Inside the elevator, we pushed one of the buttons and a distant motor generator whined into life.

We took a look around the second floor, where our flashlights revealed nothing more than a dusty collection of fossil-embedded rocks. All the other floors retained similar treasures, save for one floor filled with clock machinery.

We finally emerged on the gallery level. The spectacular daytime view was transformed as alternating shafts of moonlight and column shadows cast soft images on the tile of this Aeolian belvedere. Silence reigned. Our Keds trod softly around the four faces as we peered down to judge the best rappel venue. The east side appeared to be the most secluded.

In the northeast pillar, we came upon the little door. I tried the key. Once again, m'lady Rapunzel

smiled! The door opened to reveal a very narrow spiral staircase leading up into the darkness. We emerged into the base of the summit pyramid, and found ourselves surrounded by the bells. Each face of the pyramid had an opening leading outside. We stepped out onto an upper balcony open to the moonlight sky.

Surreal! The views from the gallery below were but framed cameos. Here, surrounded by open space,

Surrounded by open space, we seemed to be floating in a magic gondola. The Bay and Golden Gate bridges sparkled like the brilliant stars above us

we seemed to be floating in a magic gondola. The Bay and Golden Gate bridges sparkled like the brilliant stars above us, and the summit pyramid's bonds of smooth masonry swept upward behind us to the pike-topped chandelier. The realization that no one was allowed at this level added an extra tingle in the socks.

Here was High Camp. Bob and I looked at each other. We had the same thought: "What a place for romance--wouldst thou were a comely lass!" But there remained a final summit. We did a circumspect trot around the balcony and ducked back inside.

A spidery series of zigzag ladders and diminishing platforms led up inside the pyramid. Three or four flights later, a three-foot square opening revealed the inside of the chandelier.

Gardener, on the ladder behind me, asked, "Walt, what's it like up there?"

"You've got to get a load of this," I replied. I wiggled into the glass enclosure. Getting all the way inside started heating the Wildroot Cream Oil on my hair. I was about to relinquish my position to Bob when I noticed a row of small vent holes surrounding the bottom of the glass panes. I slouched down and peered out. Astounding--the panorama was here unsurpassed! It was monocular grandeur, as only one eyeball would fit per peek. Bob crept past me on the ladder for a similar experience. We congratulated each other and decided this was enough for the night.

It was past 1 a.m. Back in the belfry, we brushed past the bell that chimed the hour with its 10-pound sledgehammer clapper. Temptation set in. "I'd like to give this baby one little tap," I said to Bob. "I'll just give that hammer a tiny push and we'll get a little dong out of it." I pushed the hammer forward and was rewarded with a satisfying little chime.

And then, to our everlasting horror, we heard a whirring and grinding from the machinery below. We stared helpless as the hammer rose to its full stroke and then let go. *Ba-hhhhoonngg!*

The vibrations engulfed the body and deafened the ears. Bob and I had to use sign language to indicate "let's get the h--- out of here!"

Two weeks later, the moon was dark. We were primed for the big event. We had recruited a ground crew, and Loughman coached the final details. Dick Hargrove would hide in the bushes and signal if the coast was clear, using prearranged flashlight blinks. Gene Maxwell would stand by with his Rolleiflex and flashbulbs to photograph the event.

Loughman, Gardener, and I slung ropes and equipment over our shoulders. We hastened along darkened paths to the now-familiar entrance door, waited for passage of the midnight chimes, then made our way to the gallery floor, where Bill neatly set the ropes.

We waited until 25 minutes past the hour, when the clock's giant hands would be at full descendency and not liable to tangle the rope. With a long practiced flick of the wrist, Loughman tossed a coiled portion of the rope out into space, then passed the remainder over the balustrade until it all paid out. A cheery flashlight signal from Hargrove below indicated that it had reached the ground.

We three descenders slipped over the balustrade, set up on the line, and plunged into the darkness. The art of rappelling is gravity's reward for the effort expended, like the scuba diver's trance-like descent or the downhill skier's graceful carving turns. As a climber descends, a foot thrust can set up pendulum motion outward from the face in a series of bounds. The fisherman's knot was negotiated according to plan. As we reached flashbulb range, Maxwell stepped out of the gloom and recorded the event.

All of a sudden, we were joined by others. The campus police had been alerted by our shielded flashlight rays. How had we entered the Campanile? they wanted to know. Under heavy interrogation, I admitted to possession of the key, which they confiscated. We were identified and sent home with the admonition that the administration would be in contact with us.

The day following, we had a rush of euphoria. Maxwell had a scoop! The *Chronicle*, *Tribune*, and *Daily Cal* reported our exploit as front-page news. We began to receive enthusiastic recognition from friends and associates. But our spirits were considerably dampened when we each received an envelope from the office of the Dean of Students, requesting our presence at a hearing a few days

hence.

We had engaged in strictly prohibited and reckless behavior, Dean Chaffee Hall said. As we sat in the uncomfortable chairs of his office, he darkly hinted that the University might choose not to retain students whose lack of focus on their studies provided time for them to do foolhardy stunts on tall buildings. (We were inwardly grateful that our club's previous endeavors had gone unnoticed.)

There also remained the question of breaking and entering. We admitted to entering, but assured the Dean that there had been no breaking, nor had we done any damage. Well, he asked, who made the key? Suddenly, the collar of my shirt felt uncomfortably tight. Remembering my pledge to Louie, I was going to have to take the fall!

"Well, uh, I made the key," I falsely confessed. The dean's stern countenance indicated that I was therefore the most serious offender, and a lecture on ethics followed.

A week later, we were again in the office of the dean to receive his disciplinary sentence. Harsher measures had been considered, he said, but we were to be "campused" for the remainder of the semester: barred from any campus extracurricular activities. No Glee Club, no Hiking Club. Strict attention to our studies. Go forth chastised.

I happily set my nose to the grindstone, except for a week or so later, when I did break training for a few moments. Unobserved, I entered the hiking club headquarters in the old Eshleman Hall. There, standing tall and square in the center of the campus map, and neatly on the Campanile, was the coveted green pin!

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