

Blasting winter away at Yosemite

By Mike Anton, Los Angeles Times

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK – It's nearly summer, and swarms of cars, buses and RVs breeze through Yosemite Valley as if on conveyor belts of asphalt. But up here at 8,400 feet, along the snowbound solitude of Tioga Road, winter is still in control.

Three members of a National Park Service avalanche control team move out from their camp near Olmsted Point. They are here to bend nature's timetable and help clear the highest automobile route across the Sierra.

From a distance, they are ephemeral figures dwarfed by the eternal landscape – a steep, treeless mountainside loaded with tons of ice and snow just waiting for a trigger.

It is shortly after 5am. The temperature is in the mid-20s, and a blue dawn signals the sun's arrival. Time is short.

Tim Esquivel and Steve Lynds stop to load their backpacks from a sled laden with supplies – explosives, a spool of detonator cord, bags of charcoal, shovels. Both are in their mid-40s with ponytails and earrings, both strong as climbing rope.

Edward Canapary, 44, has climbed above them and is whaling on the frozen snow with a pick-ax. Ching-ka! Ching-ka! Chunks skitter down the hill and into the valley below.

He works fast. Spring in the mountains is a violent alchemy of hydraulics and gravity. Snowfields benignantly frozen at night awaken to the sun's heat. This windless morning's silence will soon be replaced by the ominous gurgle of percolating water lubricating the rock underneath.

Ching-ka! Ching-ka! The minutes tick by. The sky brightens imperceptibly.

When the holes are dug, Canapary calls to the men below on his radio.

“Bring the bombs up.”

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