

# S. Tahoe man one of two to ski Yosemite's Clouds Rest

By Marek Warszawski, Fresno Bee

Extreme skiing can be defined in five simple, morbid words: If you fall, you die.

The terrain these expert skiers seek out is so steep that any slip or stumble almost certainly would send them hurtling toward rocks, cliffs, crevasses ... you name it.

In other words, something way beyond your typical black diamond run.

Clouds Rest isn't a ski slope, either. It's an enormous expanse of high-angle granite, nearly a mile high and a mile wide, that sits just northeast of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.

Few people would even entertain the idea that skiing down Clouds Rest was possible. Jason Torlano is an exception.

Torlano, 37, grew up in Yosemite – his mom worked at the park medical clinic – and was introduced to its wilder ski terrain as a teenager.

Extreme skiers mark their accomplishments with first descents. Torlano has 28 of those in Yosemite, but Clouds Rest was the one he wanted most.

“From our school playground I could always see Clouds Rest,” said Torlano, who lives in Foresta, a community of private cabins within the park. “And skiing it was my dream.”

On Jan. 16, that dream became a reality. Taking advantage of ideal conditions, Torlano and Jonathan Blair of South Lake Tahoe became the first people to carve ski turns down Clouds

Rest's massive northwest face.

"This was definitely the most committing line I've ever done," Torlano said. "Five thousand feet of no-fall zone? I've never skied anything like that."

The two-day effort required not only skill, stamina and planning but also a great deal of nerve because of the severe avalanche risk. The descent also involved 500 feet of rappelling – necessary to negotiate cliffs too steep to hold snow.

"Your reaction is, 'You can't ski that. It's vertical. It's cliffs,'" said Tim Messick, a Yosemite ski pioneer who introduced a teenaged Torlano to the park's steepest terrain.

"But, yeah. Jason's doing it."

It has been quite a winter in Yosemite. December storms covered the valley and its surroundings with a thick blanket of snow, and cold temperatures kept much of it from melting while consolidating the snowpack.

Compared to rock climbing, ski mountaineering and ice climbing don't draw much attention. But when conditions are prime, like they were this month, possibilities exist for both.

On Jan. 3, Torlano and Greg Loniewski climbed Widow's Tears – a rarely formed frozen waterfall on the Valley's South rim. (Four recorded parties climbed Widow's Tears this month.) The following week, Torlano traded his ice axes and crampons for skis and made a first descent of Quarter Domes.

It was during the first descent of Quarter Domes, granite formations located between Half Dome and Clouds Rest, that his longtime dream came into focus.

"I was looking at Clouds Rest the whole time thinking, 'Man, if the snow's good here it must be good up there,'" said Torlano, a former U.S. Army paratrooper in the 173rd Airborne

Brigade who served in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Last summer, Torlano climbed Clouds Rest – not an easy feat in itself – and scoped out a potential ski route that avoided most of the cliffs and other hazards. Now he needed perfect conditions. Too much snow, and the avalanche danger would only increase. Too little, and it wouldn't be skiable.

Torlano also needed a partner, and his friend Blair was itching for some action after missing out on the Quarter Domes descent. (The two met while working for Yosemite Search and Rescue in the mid-1990s but never really had climbed or skied together.)