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## Pilgrimage to the silver god

The year 1975 was undoubtedly the most important in the short history of Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya—not only for the first Australian expedition to the Himalaya but for the beginnings of ideas and careers that would eventually lead to stunning Australian successes. In Melbourne, a small group of climbers was heading for New Zealand’s Southern Alps but dreaming of bigger things. In Canberra, enthusiastic students at The Australian National University, beginning the long build-up to launching an overseas climbing trip, were slowly changing their objective from Alaska or the Andes to a major Himalayan peak. In Perth, a young officer was made commander of a Special Air Service (SAS) unit and was ordered to climb; he took the task very seriously. In Nepal, a colonel in the Australian Army, on the classic trek to Everest base camp, sat on top of the hillock called Kala Pattar, looked up at the summit of Everest and dreamed of Australian soldiers standing there in the bicentennial year. And in Sydney, at Kingsford Smith Airport in August 1975, the first truly Australian expedition to the Himalaya was departing for India.

Australia’s first home-grown expedition was, fittingly, a national affair, with climbers from Sydney, Melbourne and Canberra making up most of the 14-person team. It also had an international flavour, with a woman from Britain and a man from France joining the trip. Their objective was Mulkila, the ‘Silver God’ mountain, a 6517 m (21 382 ft) peak in the Central Lahoul region of the Indian Himalaya.

The leader of the Mulkila expedition was Warwick Deacock, a retired major in the British Army. In 1975, there was no-one else in Australia more ideally suited to lead a Himalayan expedition than Deacock. With a background in British rock climbing, he had made climbing trips to diverse places around the world, including the Alps, the Pyrenees, Alaska, Lapland, the Atlas Mountains and Japan. From 1953 to 1956, he commanded British troops in the Ski and Mountain School at Schmeltz in Austria and in 1959 he set up the British SAS climbing wing.

In 1958, Deacock was the founder, secretary and botanist of the British Pakistani Forces expedition to Rakaposhi, one of the giants in the Pakistani portion of the Himalaya. The expedition made the first ascent of the 25 500 ft (7770 m) mountain, but Deacock, in the second summit team, had to descend when his partner, Tom Patey, a well-known Scottish ice climber, got frostbite. Deacock had reached 24 500 ft (7470 m).

After establishing the SAS climbing wing, Deacock immigrated to Australia in 1959 to become the first permanent warden of the Australian Outward Bound School, which he set up on the Hawkesbury River from 1959 to 1962. In 1961, he sailed across the Tasman Sea in a 28 ft sloop and then attempted to climb New Zealand's Mt Tasman. Perhaps his most well-known exploits, however, were several trips to Heard Island, a sub-Antarctic island under Australian jurisdiction. Those trips featured sailing and mountain-climbing components. Big Ben, a 9000 ft (2740 m) snow-covered volcano and the highest peak in Australian territory, is located on Heard Island.

The 1964–65 trip was perhaps the most memorable. Although Deacock was the overall leader of the expedition, the commander of the schooner *Patanela*, which transported the party from Sydney to Heard Island, was none other than Bill Tilman, Eric Shipton's intrepid companion on many a mountain exploration, who had become an avid sailor. Tilman got them to Heard Island in good shape, but landing the mountaineering party was another matter as there was no decent harbour on the island. Getting the five climbers ashore through the pounding surf turned out to be quite an epic, as the landing craft capsized three times and dumped its crew into the freezing water. The incidents prompted Colin Putt, one of the climbers, to remark that 'the climb was the only one started below sea level'.<sup>1</sup>

After establishing a camp at 4000 ft (1220 m), the climbing team, which included Grahame Budd, a member of the 1957 Imperial College Karakoram expedition, pushed on to the summit of Big Ben in late January, which was the first time the mountain had been climbed. The ascent was not, however, trivial. The climbers were frequently buffeted by blizzards and slowed by white-outs and they often found themselves down slots in the treacherous, crevasse-riddled slopes. Getting back on board the *Patanela* after the climb was, if anything, more difficult than the landing; most of the expedition's gear had to be left behind. The Heard Island trip was, however, a resounding testament to the effectiveness of small, lightweight, privately funded expeditions and to the skill of Deacock's leadership.

Although the 1958 Rakaposhi trip was Deacock's only climbing expedition to the Himalaya, he considerably strengthened his links with the region after coming to Australia. His old friend Colonel Jimmy Roberts, a Kathmandu-based retired

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1 Temple, P. 1969, *The World at Their Feet*, Whitcombe & Tombs, Christchurch, New Zealand, ch. 16.

officer from the Gurkha Regiment of the British Army, decided in the mid-1960s to promote walking holidays in Nepal. Roberts institutionalised the British expedition tradition of Sherpa staff, palatable food and a leisurely pace. He thus changed the style of Himalayan trekking from the spartan, uncomfortable test of endurance that the march to Rakaposhi had been to the enjoyable mountain holidays that thousands have come to enjoy.

Deacock got in on the ground floor. In 1965, he founded the company Ausventure to provide special-interest adventure holidays for Australians with an emphasis on Himalayan trekking. A year later, he teamed up with Roberts' in-country trekking company, Mountain Travel, to send six Australians to Everest base camp. Throughout the next 10 years, Deacock made numerous trips to the Himalaya, leading Ausventure treks, pioneering new routes and opening up new areas for trekking. During that period, he also sent aspiring mountaineers to the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute courses at Darjeeling and Manali and others to Sherpa Wangdi's School of Mountaineering at Manali; and even contrived, 'by some devious means',<sup>2</sup> to get a few into the Tibet Frontier Course. From 1977 to 1987, he was the Honorary Royal Nepal Consul-General to Australia and he also became the Honorary Secretary for the Australia–New Zealand Section of the Himalayan Club.

By 1973, Ausventure was organising some very adventurous treks—for example, a trip in heavy snow over the Tesi Lapcha Pass, a technically difficult and high (19 000 ft, 5790 m) link between the Rolwaling Valley and the Khumbu. Returned trekkers from arduous trips such as that began to express a desire to learn more about the high Himalayan peaks. Deacock judged that Australians might be ready to do more than just walk through the mountains. The idea for the first Australian expedition—like the beginnings of many good adventures—came at a social gathering, as Deacock recalled: 'the idea was generated over a beer at the International Mountaineers' Meet at Darjeeling in 1973 to which I was a delegate. Australian climbers seemed about ready to launch upon the Himalaya and Mulkila at 21 380 feet [6518 m], seemed to suit the bill.'<sup>3</sup>

Deacock knew the Himalaya inside out and was thus in a perfect position to select a suitable peak for a first Australian attempt. Mulkila, or Mulkila IV as it is more accurately known, is the highest of a group of 10 or so peaks in the Central Lahoul region of the Indian Himalaya. It had been climbed several times previously—first in 1939 by a British/Austrian expedition—and presented no great technical difficulties for first-timers in the Himalaya. The base camp for the mountain was located in a valley surround by seven peaks 18 000–20 000 ft (5500–6000 m) high of varying difficulty, a couple of which were, at that time, unclimbed. There was something for everyone.

2 W. Deacock, Interview.

3 Deacock, W. 1975, *The fifth silver god*, Report on Mulkila expedition.

But where would the climbers come from? Deacock was well aware of Australian climbers' earlier reputation, as he pointed out in his *Himalayan Journal* article on the trip: 'Australians hit the mountain scene with a rather unfortunate bang after the War when transmitting their competitive aggressions from the sports field and proceeded to kill themselves on Mount Cook, the biggest peak in the New Zealand Alps.'<sup>4</sup>

He was, however, also aware of the training courses that the Australian section of the NZAC had established and he had met many of their graduates on Ausventure outings. By passing the word around the Ausventure fraternity and their connections via a series of 'seldom newsletters', Deacock assembled a heterogeneous team of 14 climbers, with an age span of 38 years and including three women (see image 5.1).

The youngest was twenty-one-year-old Adrian Blake of Killara, New South Wales, and the oldest fifty-nine-year-old Harry Eldridge of Strathfield, New South Wales. By far the most experienced member of the team was Josephine Flood (nee Scarr), who in the early 1960s had teamed with Barbara Spark as a two-person expedition to make first ascents of several 19 000–21 000 ft (5800–6400 m) peaks in the Kulu area of India and then took part in an all-woman British expedition that made the first ascent of Kanjiroba (21 035 ft, 6413 m) in western Nepal. As described in more detail later (Chapter 28), Flood was one of the first Australian women to climb in the Himalaya, although her Himalayan career did not extend beyond Mulkila. The other women on the Mulkila trip were Canberra schoolteacher Dorothy Brown, who was asked by Deacock to lead the first Ausventure trek to Everest base camp, and Terri Jack of Britain.

The strong Victorian contingent on the trip included Mike Richards, John Ryder, Garry Ash and Keith Seddon. In addition to Deacock, Blake and Eldridge, Derek Lucas, Jim Dorrington and Peter Morris, the expedition doctor, were from New South Wales. John Wanless, along with Dorothy Brown, was from Canberra. Completing the team was Frenchman Michel Altermann, who was born in Cognac. On learning that fact, Deacock immediately advised him that a bottle or two from his hometown would be most welcome on the trip.

The expedition was approached in vintage Deacock 'rumdoodle' fashion. He firmly believed in a less serious attitude than was often found among younger, more competitive Himalayan climbers. The enjoyment comes more from the adventure of the journey itself—from seeing new places, experiencing different cultures and travelling through wild and beautiful places—than from simply getting to the top of a mountain. He summed it up by saying:

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4 Deacock, W. 1975, 'The Silver God mountain (Mulkila) 1975', *Himalayan Journal*, vol. 34, pp. 156–7.

To some it [an expedition] signifies a worthy conglomeration of people with an august patron and committee which undertakes at considerable expense a ponderous attempt to ‘conquer’ some natural hazard—often a peak. Success does not always ensue; death frequently does, and this is accepted by the uplift school of thinkers as inevitable and glorious and by media sponsors as a bonus...Our journey to climb Mulkila IV, the ‘Silver God’ peak, was seen as a fun thing, a light-hearted rebellion by a party of people who enjoy high places.<sup>5</sup>

Deacock also shunned extensive sponsorship by external sources. ‘An expedition,’ he said, ‘is when you get together with a group of friends, sell the family car, and go off into the unknown for a good time.’<sup>6</sup> Every member of the Mulkila team paid his or her own way, including Deacock himself, who admitted to the team in a newsletter that ‘I gave up grog for a year to save up and pay my own way’.<sup>7</sup> His philosophy was that the expedition should have ‘no letterhead, no publicity and no free milk powder’.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to simply having a good adventure with a group of friends, Deacock had a further purpose in organising the Mulkila expedition: to train the first large group of Australian climbers to handle the conditions of Himalayan mountaineering or, as he put it, ‘to expose climbers from Down Under to the needs of Up Yonder’.<sup>9</sup> Although Deacock was an old hand at Himalayan climbing and trekking, most of the rest of the team were novices. They would be getting their first taste of Himalayan expedition climbing, with its vagaries of local transport, base camp food, weather, group dynamics and snow conditions on the mountain.

There is nothing better to introduce a novice to the Himalayan expedition scene than an extended trip on a local bus. The Mulkila team was not disappointed. One of the advantages of choosing Mulkila was its relative ease of access; the walk to base camp took only three days. Before that, however, came a bus ride of the type only the Himalaya could produce, with its mixture of narrow, potholed, winding, landslide-prone roads, dilapidated vehicles and determined, bordering on maniacal drivers.

For the Mulkila newcomers, their bus journey through Lahoul was a real eye-opener and probably the most dangerous thing they did on the entire expedition. Threatened by rock avalanches, tossed about by a head-on collision and delayed by punctures and mechanical failures, they reached base camp only by the perseverance of their driver. Determined to let absolutely nothing stop him, he won the admiration of the trip members, particularly that of the doctor, Peter Morris. Morris’s admiration, however, quickly turned to horror when, in the very best tradition of expedition doctors, he contracted a case of diarrhoea during the journey and could not convince

5 Deacock, *The fifth silver god*.

6 W. Deacock, Interview.

7 Deacock, *The fifth silver god*.

8 Ibid.

9 Deacock, ‘The Silver God mountain (Mulkila) 1975’.

the driver to stop for him. After all, if you can get through avalanches and survive collisions, why stop for a little discomfort experienced by one of the members? It was a most memorable journey for Morris.

### Through Lahoul by bus

Peter Morris

The trip in on the bus for two days was an extraordinary adventure in itself. The bus went over mountain passes that are swept by avalanches so that the road has to be continually rebuilt. At one stage on the trip in, there was a tremendous rainstorm and, sure enough, there was an avalanche, a rock fall, which had come right across the road in front of us. We had a small Sikh driver who would stop at nothing. We reached this rock fall where the road was blocked and we thought that the expedition would be over and we would be back in Delhi. But nothing stopped this driver!

He took his turban off, put it on the steering wheel—he didn't want to get it wet—and leapt out of the bus. In the rain, with rocks whizzing down like cannon shot and bouncing all around him, he pulled the biggest rocks off the road so he could get his bus through. I've never seen such dedication! We all sat inside, and he was working out there all on his own in the rain. So half a dozen of us put on our climbing helmets and went out and started helping him move the big rocks. We eventually got the worst of them out of the way, and he gradually eased the bus over the rubble and on we went.

Further on that day, we came to another narrow piece of road with a sharp corner. As we came around the corner, what should we meet but another bus! We had a head-on collision. People were thrown all over the place. The radiator broke on the other bus, but our bus surprisingly kept going. Later the rear suspension completely broke to the extent that the people sitting over the arch on the back wheels started to feel a tremendous vibration and smell burning rubber. Then they started to see the rubber of the wheel coming through the arch! In fact, we were running on the chassis! The driver didn't stop. We pointed to it, he said, 'Yes, yes', and just kept on driving.

He eventually pulled into a construction site where there was engineering work. We were taken off and shown something for half an hour or so while the bus was descended on by about 30 Indians, who jacked it up, made the right brackets and things on the spot, bolted them all in place, and the bus went on!

Nothing would stop this driver. Some of the turns on that road were so sharp he couldn't make it in one go. So he would go into the corner as far as he could and then back around a bit, with the back of the bus hanging right over the edge of the gorge. One wheel of the dual wheels on the back would be hanging in air about 200 feet straight above the river. We reached one of these corners and I got off. I had had enough! I wasn't going to sit in this bus. I've heard many reports since then of buses rolling into the gorge. Everyone would have been killed in that situation; it was extremely dangerous.

But that driver was quite extraordinary. If you had him for a bus driver, he would drive from here to the North Pole and not stop! Nothing would stop him!

Base camp life was enriched considerably by the inclusion on the trip of the Frenchman Altermann, who was a chauvinist in more ways than one. Despite the fact that he was on an Australian expedition, he refused to speak anything but French. This necessitated that he share a tent with Jo Flood, who had lived

in Paris and spoke French. Morris was the third inhabitant of the tent. Altermann thought it peculiar that there were women on the expedition and informed Flood, who was undoubtedly the most experienced high-altitude climber of the team, that she should be at home doing the shopping and looking after the kids. Flood is,

as Morris describes, not ‘a woman who can be taken lightly’<sup>10</sup> and the altercations between Altermann and Flood—conducted in French at the tops of their voices—kept Morris awake into many a long night at base camp.

The approach to Mulkila IV from base camp—a long march up the Milang Glacier—provided the climbers with a good sampling of Himalayan conditions: searing heat and blinding solar radiation during the day, bitter cold at night, 25 kg loads to carry through soft snow and the breathlessness and headaches of altitude. As compensation, however, it also provided views of a spectacular mountain basin ringed with soaring peaks. With Wanless and Blake in the lead much of the time, three camps were established along the glacier before a steep slope was climbed to gain the main ridge leading to the summit. Fixed ropes were placed on some nearly vertical sections of mixed snow and rotten rock; the climbing was more difficult than had been anticipated.

The team established camp four at 19 400 ft (5900 m) in a precarious position on the main ridge, but several attempts to complete the steep traverse to the summit were repulsed by treacherous snow conditions, described as ‘silky snow lying on stacked saucers’.<sup>11</sup> The climbers, however, did not return empty-handed as six of them climbed Mulkila V, a nearby peak of 20 000 ft (6000 m).

Although the primary objective of Mulkila IV was not climbed, the trip was judged a success. Six of the climbers ascended a 20 000 ft (6000 m) peak and all gained valuable experience climbing and living in Himalayan conditions. In fact, the team was defeated in their attempt on Mulkila IV by two of the more common conditions that confronted Himalayan climbers: unstable and often dangerous snow conditions on the mountain and a rapid deterioration of physical strength, often due to problems with food.

The first problem is invariably present to some extent on mountains of 7000 m (23 000 ft), which are too high for the snow to melt and refreeze to consolidate into a firm pack. It could sometimes occur on lower peaks as well, as it did in the Mulkila region in 1975. Trying to push through soft, bottomless snow is not only physically exhausting, it can be quite dangerous, particularly when combined with a sharp ridge, cornices or moderately angled slopes. There is always a chance that by trying to push on through such unstable snow conditions, climbers will trigger an avalanche or collapse a cornice and be swept to their deaths in the process. Faced with such conditions, it is usually wise to retreat, just as the Mulkila climbers did.

<sup>10</sup> P. Morris, Interview.

<sup>11</sup> Deacock, ‘The Silver God mountain (Mulkila) 1975’.

Perhaps even more important, however, in stopping the Mulkila team were problems with food and drink. It seems utterly basic and obvious that adequate food and drink should be provided on a climbing trip, but delivering the goods in a remote area of the Himalaya is much easier said than done. More than a few expeditions have been considerably slowed or stopped in their tracks by problems with food.

The culinary hardships that the Mulkila team suffered were not of their own making, as Deacock was knowledgeable enough about this aspect of Himalayan climbing to have planned for adequate provisions. Rather, the problem was in the execution. It seemed that the Indian outfitter the expedition had contracted was untrustworthy or, as Deacock put it, 'a rogue if there ever was one'.<sup>12</sup> He, or his porters, apparently stole a significant amount of the expedition's supplies, including a large portion of the kerosene. Without fuel for cooking, it was difficult to use many of the supplies, particularly the rice, which the team had counted on as a staple. Perhaps more importantly, it soon became difficult to obtain enough liquid at high altitude when the fuel had to be rationed, as the only way to obtain water was to melt snow. Just when the climbers were in position to go for the summit, the fuel had virtually run out. Dehydration was then a severe problem and, as Wanless pointed out, the performances of many climbers were adversely affected.

Nevertheless, Deacock and many of the expedition members were pleased with the trip. 'We had climbed the fifth Silver God instead of the fourth,' Deacock said, 'had a lot of fun, and no one suffered serious injury—so I suppose it was a success.'<sup>13</sup>

Deacock happily 'misused' the facilities of his company Ausventure to help arrange the administrative details of the Mulkila trip. In that regard, the Mulkila expedition was an antecedent of the commercial mountaineering trips that would start to play a role in Australian Himalayan climbing in the late 1980s.

As a result of the Mulkila experience, however, Deacock concluded that he would not in future offer expeditions within a commercial framework. His reasons were based on ethical and practical considerations. As for the former, he was well aware of the risks of Himalayan mountaineering, having lost six companions in mountaineering accidents over the years, and he believed that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to vet applicants. There was therefore a chance that a 'paying customer' could perish. That was a responsibility that Deacock did not wish to assume.

On the more practical side, Deacock had been involved in the organisation of seven Himalayan expeditions and was very familiar with the amount of drudgery needed to get a trip off the ground. He judged that to cost properly the administrative

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<sup>12</sup> Deacock, *The fifth silver god*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

time required to launch a Himalayan expedition of whatever size would make it commercially untenable. His chief reservation, however, remained the ethical one of a climber's responsibility for the safety of his companions on the mountain.

It was another five years before Deacock organised his next expedition to the Himalaya, but by that time much had changed in the Australian Himalayan scene. As described in later chapters, during the late 1970s, more and more Australians were travelling to the Himalaya to climb. Some of these expeditions, especially those to Changabang and Dunagiri, were far more ambitious undertakings to mountains higher and technically more difficult than Mulkila. The ante in Australian Himalayan mountaineering had been raised considerably.

In keeping with these trends, the tenor, objectives and organisation of Deacock's second trip were very different from those of the Mulkila expedition. The goal was Annapurna III, one of the many daunting summits of the massive Annapurna Range, a 20 km long massif of ice and snow hanging above the tropical lowlands of central Nepal. Over its entire length, the range never falls below 7000 m (23 000 ft). Annapurna I, the highest summit of the Himal, was the first 8000 m mountain to be climbed, but it—and indeed the entire Annapurna massif—has since gained the reputation as one of the most dangerous Himalayan areas in which to climb. The death rate of climbers attempting Annapurna I is higher than that for any other 8000 m peak. For the Australian team of 1980, Annapurna III—one of the 'Givers of Life'—would prove to be just the opposite: a deity of far more treacherous and lethal nature than Mulkila, the Silver God.

By the late 1970s, after the success of the Mulkila expedition and the impressive Australian performances on Changabang and Dunagiri (cf. Chapters 6, 7 and 9), Deacock thought it appropriate for Australian mountaineers to go for something about 25 000 ft (7600 m). His choice of 24 859 ft (7582 m) Annapurna III seemed ideal. It was just the right height and its northern flanks provided snow slopes of reasonable but not excessive steepness and were free of any great technical difficulties. Furthermore, the trek in to base camp, on the northern side of the Annapurna massif, would be a fascinating walk through a remote corner of the Himalaya. Although that trek is now part of the well-trodden Annapurna circuit, the area north of the range had just been opened to Westerners in 1980 and was still a somewhat out-of-the-way region.

In keeping with Deacock's decision not to arrange expeditions commercially, the Annapurna III trip was organised privately with its own committee and delegated responsibilities. To obtain the considerable financial support required, Deacock went around to many of his friends and acquaintances in business to obtain sponsorships, but in the end much of the necessary \$100 000 came from individuals who contributed small sums. In addition, many of the trip members were given

fundraising tasks, such as holding film shows or giving lectures. Another source of support was a series of three treks to the Annapurna III base camp. The 36 trekkers got to meet the climbers and enjoy a professionally arranged trek while, by doing so, contributing towards the expedition expenses. The same idea was used successfully eight years later to raise some support for the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition.

Geoff Wyatt, the well-known New Zealand guide, was originally selected as the climbing leader, but, because of other commitments, he was forced to withdraw before the trip's departure. Wyatt's replacement was Colin Monteath, another climber with Australian and New Zealand connections. Originally from Scotland, Monteath moved to Australia with his family at the age of nine. He spent the rest of his childhood and early adulthood in Australia, where he took up rock climbing. Soon after graduating from Sydney University in 1972, he moved to New Zealand and quickly became an accomplished alpine climber. He worked as a mountain guide at Mt Cook National Park and as a field operations officer for the New Zealand Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) Antarctic Division. His mountaineering experience included not only extensive time in the Southern Alps, but climbing trips to Peru, Canada and Antarctica.

Deacock and Monteath's team included several others with professional connections with mountain activities. Geof Bartram, originally from South Australia, had become a mountain guide based in the United States and Steve Colman had just set up Wilderness Expeditions, an outdoor adventure company centred on trips in the Snowy Mountains. Jonathan Chester, who was establishing himself as an adventure writer/photographer, also joined the trip. One of the most experienced alpine climbers of the team was Faye Kerr, a next-generation Dot Butler who had stacked up an impressive record of climbs in the Southern Alps and had become a ranger in Mt Cook National Park.

Other team members included Ray Johnston, a retired lawyer; Jack Higgs, from the Maritime Services Board of Sydney; Canberra student Stafford Morse; Adrian Blake, a radio technician; and Melbourne barrister Nick Reeves. Steve McDowell, Richard Schmidt and doctors Ken Bowes and Brian Fearnley completed the group. Although the Annapurna III team had an abundance of alpine climbing experience, only Blake, a member of the Mulkila expedition, had been on a Himalayan mountaineering trip before.

The Annapurna III venture was beset by extraordinarily bad luck from the start, as it nearly came undone by a bizarre accident in Bangkok well before it had reached the Himalaya. Colman recounted the incident:

In the morning, after staying in some cheapish hotel, we were all heading back to the airport in taxis. We had a van in which we stacked all our gear—it was absolutely full.

On the way to the airport the back door of the van flew open and it left all our luggage strewn through the streets of Bangkok for a couple of kilometres. The van driver finally realised that the door had flown open, closed it, and managed to get some of the luggage to the airport. But it was quite tense at the airport as we went through the gear to see what we had lost. Some people's rucksacks, with all their climbing gear, had gone missing.

But we were fortunate in that an enterprising taxi driver, who had been following us, had stopped and picked up all the gear on the road. We managed to get it all back.<sup>14</sup>

Although that incident was a bad omen for the trip, the next stages went smoothly. Everyone, and the gear, arrived safely in Kathmandu and the 10-day trek up the Marsayandi Valley lived up to its expectations as a pleasant walk in a remote part of the Himalaya.

Base camp was established near the village of Manang, in an idyllic grassy glade among trees at an altitude of 3850 m (12 600 ft). The pleasant surroundings and low altitude meant that base camp would be an excellent place to recuperate mentally and physically after extended bouts with the mountain.

The team immediately went to work organising gear for the siege-style assault on Annapurna III. Equipment had to be unpacked and checked, food sorted into packets suitable to be carried up the mountain and kerosene filtered and decanted into sturdy, small containers. And most importantly, the team had to get the blessing of the local Buddhist monk, as Nick Reeves reported:

Inside a hall, with the walls lined with golden buddhas and large leatherbound prayer books, we stood together as the lama chanted his blessing, accompanied by cymbals and drums. We prayed to the god of Annapurna III. Incense spread throughout the room. We each made an offering and were told that the lamas would spend an hour each day praying for our well-being. Returning from the temple, we passed a row of Buddhist prayer wheels. Each expedition member loudly spun the wheels while silently making a prayer for success and safety.<sup>15</sup>

The route the team decided on was essentially one that a Swiss group had followed a few years earlier. The only real difficulty was an icfall at 20 000 ft (6000 m), below which the climb was a slog up glaciers and easier-angled snow and above which a series of 45-degree snow slopes led directly to the summit. The moderately angled slopes, however, were also something of a trap, as they often held snow ripe

<sup>14</sup> S. Colman, Interview.

<sup>15</sup> Reeves, N. 1980, 'We prayed to the god of Annapurna', *The Australian Women's Weekly*, 14 May 1980, pp. 2–5.

for avalanching. The avalanche-prone nature of the route was a concern expressed earlier by several other Australian climbers who had seen photos of the northern aspects of Annapurna III.

With the gear sorted and packed and plenty of time up their sleeves, team members methodically moved food and equipment up to a dump on the glacier at about 14 500 ft (4420 m) and then to a provisional camp at 16 000 ft (4880 m). Very early in the load-carrying phase of the expedition, however, Annapurna III sounded a terrifying warning to those who would tread on even its lower slopes. Colman recalled the incident vividly:

I was carrying a load up the ridge towards the storage dump. Some of the others had gone ahead and were out on the glacier, sort of ahead but down below me. They had dropped down off the ridge so they were probably a couple of hundred feet below me, about four or five hundred metres away.

There was an almighty roar, and a huge bit of the icefall at 20 000 feet broke off. It seemed to drop five to six hundred feet and then hit a series of very steep slopes. It exploded over the whole mountain into an absolutely enormous powder avalanche. There was a 1000 ft wave of airborne powder roaring down. It was absolutely stunning!

There were three of us paralysed on the ridge watching the two or three others on the glacier. They were in deep, heavy snow. You could see them turn around and start to run backwards, but after two steps they just slowed and stopped. The powder then poured between us and them. When it settled, we could see that the avalanche had finished two or three hundred metres away from them. It was quite daunting to see the power of the mountain.<sup>16</sup>

Although the avalanche had emphasised the danger of the north face of Annapurna III, it had also given the team some encouragement. The icefall appeared to be very stable and there was little debris below it to indicate that it calved seracs—or pillars of ice—frequently. Perhaps that was the icefall's one avalanche of the year and the route below it would be safe for quite some time.

The provisional camp was moved another 100–300 m up the glacier, to a more sheltered site, and subsequently well provisioned to form an advanced base camp from which the assault on the mountain could be staged. Alternating teams of load carriers moved up to the camp to spend a few days to acclimatise for the higher altitudes.

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16 S. Colman, Interview.

During one such acclimatisation stay, heavy snowfalls triggered another avalanche, and this time the camp was in the path. Fortunately, it was a much smaller avalanche than the first and, although one tent, with two occupants, was tumbled 150 m down the slope and another tent destroyed, no-one was killed or seriously injured. The seven climbers at the camp—Bartram, Bowes, Blake, Chester, Morse, Reeves and Schmidt—spent a most uncomfortable night crammed into one tent.

It was obvious, however, that the heavy snows had put the slopes above the camp in a very dangerous condition, so at first light the party began to descend. The first part of the climb back down to base camp went smoothly, as the team crossed the glacier and gained the ridge before the mountain sent any more avalanches crashing down. They had apparently escaped the clutches of Annapurna III.

Just before the climbers reached the safety of base camp—in fact, only 400–500 m above the camp—they had to traverse a small cirque that had recently been covered with snow from the storms. Often the cirque was completely bare of snow—a small grassy bowl with slopes of about 30-degree steepness. This time, as the line of climbers crossed the slope, it cracked right back to grass level and the whole slab of snow gave way. The resulting avalanche, in comparison with the ones that had thundered down the north face of Annapurna III, was trivial. Colman said, ‘I’ve seen bigger avalanches in the Snowy Mountains.’<sup>17</sup> Its consequences, however, were devastating.

Six of the seven climbers were in the cirque when the slab gave way. Jonathan Chester, who had stopped to take a photograph, was still on the ridge above. Geof Bartram managed to dive off the back of the slab and directly onto the grass, thus avoiding the slide down the cirque. The other five were taken in the avalanche. Ken Bowes, one of the expedition doctors, was only partially buried and was able to dig himself out. Adrian Blake was buried but had a hand still visible. The three who had escaped saw Blake’s hand almost immediately and pulled him out of the snow, but there was no sign of the other three.

### Avalanche on Annapurna

Jonathan Chester

At first I thought I was dreaming—the side of the tent was caved in. Then I felt around me and there was nothing but snow. What was this doing inside the tent? Richard’s feet, which were at my head, were kicking frantically. I began to panic and struggle for breath. I tried to make a space for some air around my head by winding my hand over my face. More snow fell down and I panicked again but somehow managed to regain control. By continuing to wind my arms upwards in search of air, more snow fell down onto my face, choking me. Suddenly my hand broke through the surface and I gulped the life giving oxygen. The realisation that I was close to the surface gave me the strength to break through and stand up in the small hole I had made. Once on top I saw that our tent was completely buried and the tunnel tent nowhere in sight. Only Stafford and Adrian’s tent was still standing unscathed.

17 Ibid.

Adrian and Stafford were probing with ski stocks in search of the buried tunnel tent and when I emerged they turned their efforts to helping me dig out my tent mates. A muffled cry of 'I can't breathe, I can't breathe,' came from Geoff's direction. The weight of snow on the tent poles and fabric was crushing his chest. Stafford went to work to free him while I frantically dug for Richard. As soon as I reached his head some moans and gasps told me he was alive and I returned to help extricate Geoff. With both Stafford and myself burrowing and clawing at the snow he was soon free and popped up like a chorus girl out of a giant cake. Richard, although his body was now mostly exposed by my digging, was still lying prone and struggling to get up. I couldn't work out what was restraining him. Then I saw an inch diameter aluminium tent pole lying across his throat. At first I feared he may have had a broken neck but then I remembered how strongly he'd kicked me when we were lying side by side. With the strength of a frightened man I was able to lift the pole that pinned him and we embraced, showing great relief and joy to be alive.

All of us were clad only in thermal underwear and it was snowing and blowing. Geoff and Richard were suffering from the shock and trauma of those minutes under the snow, so they sought shelter in the remaining tent. Stafford, Adrian and myself began to dig and probe for the third tent. We found nothing, but not wishing to believe they were dead I kept on burrowing frantically. My bare hands were now senseless. Time seemed to stand still, and yet the more I dug the less chance I felt of seeing them alive. About half an hour had elapsed since I had been buried and gradually reason entered my thinking. Frostbite was a distinct possibility so I staggered back to the tent in search of some gloves and boots. Clad only in Damart underwear and socks the adrenalin must have been sufficient to keep me going in the wind and the snow. But slowly the chilling reality of it all began to creep through me. Adrian was also back in the tent looking for boots, Geoff and Richard were snug in sleeping bags and Stafford was still out searching.

Several minutes later we heard shouts and screams in the distance. I had given up hope of seeing the others alive but I hurried out of the tent just in case. It was dark and down the hill I saw a torchlight and voices could be heard. I lurched down the slopes through thigh-deep snow. Could they still be alive? My heart thumped in anticipation. When Stafford cried out, 'They are safe', 'It's OK,' I couldn't believe my ears. It was heavy going but the thought of seeing Nick and Ken alive drove me on. My mind was racing over the events of the last hour. Everything had been so sudden and unexpected, and that they should also survive after being swept downhill was simply incredible. My mind must have drifted for I suddenly found myself wandering back uphill. I turned around and started back down and was soon faced with Nick and Ken, both very much alive, and Stafford guiding the way.

Back at the tent the problem was how to squeeze seven people into a 7' x 7' pyramid. But the pure joy of seeing everyone safe and well more than compensated for the discomfort of cramped quarters. As we clad ourselves in duvets or sleeping bags, Nick described their miraculous escape. Their tunnel tent had been bowled downhill like a balloon before coming to rest on top of the avalanche. They simply had to unzip the door of the tent and step outside. The process of gathering boots, sleeping bags and torches accounted for the length of time we had searched with no sight or sound of them.

The celebration of life that followed our reunion was deep and emotional. Time and again Nick broke the silence with, 'I can't believe I'm alive.' It was hot and stuffy in the pyramid and Richard and I called to Adrian to let in some fresh air. We were the furthest from the door and after our temporary burial we were feeling a little claustrophobic.

From 'Annapurna tragedy', *Australian Rock*, vols 3-4 (1981), no. 19.

While Chester, Bartram and Bowes continued the search, Blake was sent down to base camp for help. He first appeared as a dot above camp, then as a wildly waving figure as he moved closer. It did not take long to raise a rescue party as some of the climbers had intuitively sensed that something had gone wrong on the mountain and had begun preparations for a trip up to the higher camp.

Climbers buried in an avalanche could not survive for long, so it soon was painfully obvious that the rescue operation had become a search for bodies. Over the next few hours after the base camp party had arrived, the bodies of Stafford Morse, Richard Schmidt and Nick Reeves were found, one by one, buried in the snow. The avalanche—ridiculously small by Himalayan standards—had carried them down the cirque and into a gully, which had funnelled the snow just deep enough to bury them.

For the first time, Australians had experienced the all-too-frequent Himalayan occurrence: the sudden shock of losing climbing companions and good friends. There was no question about the attempt to climb Annapurna III. It was finished. Not only had much equipment been lost in the avalanches, the loss of three companions had knocked the psychological stuffing out of the rest of the team. After a simple ceremony in which Morse, Schmidt and Reeves were buried near base camp, the expedition departed.

The tragedy of the Annapurna III expedition was not, however, quite over. After the attempt was called off, Faye Kerr went on a painting/trekking trip to the Garhwal region of the Indian Himalaya. A short while later, she died of a stomach complaint in India.

Deacock later admitted that ‘maybe we bit off more than we could chew. I thought we were ready for a 25 000 footer, but things went terribly wrong.’<sup>18</sup>

There is no doubt that routes on the north side of Annapurna are fraught with danger from avalanches. In all fairness to Deacock and his team, however, they were well aware of those dangers and were evacuating the mountain after the first serious snowstorm. It was an extraordinarily freak avalanche that took the lives of the three climbers. Mike Cheney, a veteran of the trekking/climbing business in Nepal, wrote in his summary of the 1980 season, ‘The Annapurna III accident was particularly tragic and a severe blow to Australian mountaineering. It was an exceptionally well organised and carefully planned expedition.’<sup>19</sup>

The Annapurna III tragedy convinced Deacock that leading serious Himalayan mountaineering expeditions was no longer for him. It was the last time he was directly involved in a major Himalayan climbing expedition. By then, however, he had already had a lasting influence on Australian climbing in the Himalaya in two ways.

First, his company, Ausventure, continued to provide Himalayan trekking holidays for hundreds of Australians and he and his company provided logistical support for several other Australian expeditions. In addition, by the late 1970s and early 1980s,

18 W. Deacock, Interview.

19 Cheney, M. J. 1980, Nepal Himalayan expedition report premonsoon 1980, Unpublished ms.

## HIMALAYAN DREAMING

other trekking companies, such as Australian Himalayan Expeditions, Peregrine Expeditions and Wilderness Expeditions, had come onto the scene to provide hundreds more Australians the opportunity to walk in the high Himalaya. Some of these trekkers, introduced to the Himalaya by an organised trek through one of these companies, would later return as members of Australian climbing expeditions.

Second, Warwick Deacock made a most significant direct contribution to Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya. With his Mulkila expedition in 1975, he started the ball rolling (see image 5.2).

This text is taken from *Himalayan Dreaming: Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia, 1922–1990*, by Will Steffen, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.