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Long necks on Dunagiri

On arriving in India, Peter Cocker almost immediately proved his value as leader of the Dunagiri expedition. An advance party of three, with Charlie Massy in charge, had travelled to New Delhi in early April, a few days ahead of the main party. One of their tasks was to clear all of the expedition's equipment through Indian customs and prepare it for the truck journey to the Himalayan foothills. When the main party arrived, however, the gear had not moved from the customs hall and the frustrated Massy—used to dealing with such matters in a straightforward and honest way—was at his wit's end. Cocker, an old hand at the Asian way of doing things, diagnosed the problem instantly, greased the appropriate palms, the underpaid customs officers suddenly worked furiously and the gear flowed freely from the hall.

The next obstacle was the formidable gorge of the Rishi Ganga, the only access to the southern side of Dunagiri. For years, the gorge had repelled explorers trying to penetrate the Nanda Devi Sanctuary and it was not until 1935 that Eric Shipton and Bill Tilman finally forced their way up the gorge and into the sanctuary. Their route was a hair-raising combination of precarious river crossings, steep slogs up slippery gullies and delicate traverses across narrow, slabby ledges perched high on the gorge walls. It was not a walk for the faint-hearted.

If anything, the trip up the Rishi Ganga was worse for the Dunagiri team, as the high-level route that Shipton and Tilman had used to avoid the first section of the gorge was closed because of heavy, late-winter snowfalls. There were reports of avalanches plunging down into the forests well below the snowline. The situation forced the team into the bed of the gorge, where the precipitous walls necessitated frequent crossings of the fast-flowing Rishi Ganga.

The fact that other expeditions had earlier gone up the gorge was of little use; the afternoon floods caused by snowmelt in the sanctuary washed away the temporary log bridges they had built. To expedite this aspect of the journey, Cocker sent an advance party of Charlie Massy, Ken Baldwin, Ken Bell, Martin Stone, Tim Macartney-Snape, Lincoln Hall and Sher Singh, the sirdar or leader of the local staff, out in front to lessen the difficulty and danger for the heavily laden porters by securing the river crossings before the arrival of the main party.

There were other dangerous parts of the trek to base camp. When the route finally left the treacherous riverbed, it led up steep, muddy cliffs where a slip would be fatal. It did little good for the morale of the party when the porters frequently pointed out places where people had fallen to their deaths. All in all, it was an arduous trip to base camp—probably as difficult as any in the Himalaya.

There was at least one close scrape with death on the walk in to base camp. Cocker, who was coming up at the rear of the party to look after stragglers and deal with porter strikes or any other unforeseen event, nearly went into the Rishi. '[T]o fall into this torrent was certain death,' he recalled. 'Rocks could be heard rolling along the bed; it was icy and moved with crushing force... While catching up to the others, I had a close call when part of a bridge traversing a small cliff collapsed. I fell through the middle but caught a support on either side of me.'¹

Fortunately, the team did not have to follow the Rishi Ganga all the way into the sanctuary. Access to the Dunagiri area was via the Ramani Glacier, to the north of the gorge. Base camp was established on a grassy patch of moraine along the glacier and, after a period of sorting gear and setting up tents, the group began a reconnaissance of the unclimbed East Ridge. They had originally planned to attempt the North Ridge, but it had been climbed by a Japanese expedition a year earlier.

The first thing to impress the ANU climbers was the enormous scale of the Himalaya (see images 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3). It was a long, hard push of several kilometres just to get from base camp to the start of the East Ridge, and the ridge was just as nasty as they had expected from photos taken by Australians who attempted nearby Changabang the previous year (cf. Chapter 9). The ridge was very long, laced with cornices, even double cornices in places, and was guarded by a number of rocky gendarmes—outcroppings of steep rock that barred a direct route along the top of the ridge. These features, combined with the logistical difficulties of moving gear and supplies up the long glacier, meant that the East Ridge would be a very serious proposition.

1 P. Cocker, Interview.

Leading the reconnaissance were Lincoln Hall and Tim Macartney-Snape. To get a better look at the ridge, the pair made an attempt on Purbi Dunagiri, a 6600 m outlier of Dunagiri. Even though they were not yet fully acclimatised to higher altitudes, they pushed to within 300 m of the summit of the difficult granite peak. Their efforts raised some anxiety in base camp when they missed their regular radio call during the climb. The tension was relieved at 9pm when the radio crackled with the tune of *Waltzing Matilda* played on a mouth organ, their self-devised identification call for the daily radio schedules.

Cocker had quickly seen and heard enough of the East Ridge to decide that it was too difficult and dangerous for his inexperienced crew. With little hesitation, he switched the attack to the South-West Ridge, a variant of the route by which Dunagiri had first been climbed by the Swiss in 1939. In that ascent, Roche approached the ridge from the north, whereas the ANU team would be taking a route from the south to gain the ridge itself. There was little cause for relaxation, however, because of the change of routes. Access to the start of the South-West Ridge was still long and arduous and a steep headwall topped by a difficult mixed ice and rock step was the only way to get from the glacier to the ridge.

The route the Australians were now concentrating on had been climbed the previous year by an American expedition, but its triumph almost immediately turned to tragedy when all four climbers fell to their deaths on the descent. Sher Singh, who had been the sirdar for the American expedition, recounted the incident and impressed on the team the seriousness of the South-West Ridge. Evidence of the American saga was constantly around the ANU team as they climbed. Martin Stone reported being aware of ‘the “presence” of our luckless American precursors in the gaping burial crevasse, our minds constantly jogged by chopped and bleached fixed ropes draped on ledges and projections and appearing out of ice bulges’.²

Another idea quickly abandoned was that of a quick, lightweight alpine-style ascent in which a few climbers, carrying everything they needed on their backs, climbed a mountain in a single concerted push. Dunagiri was far too big and difficult for that—something that even the ambitious young climbers recognised very quickly.

Lincoln Hall’s first impression of Dunagiri was typical of their reaction:

Research had revealed that the Garhwal Himalaya in India was a region well suited to expeditions with modest ambitions. Our mistake was that we selected Dunagiri rather than any of the other peaks nearby...At just over 7,000 metres Dunagiri is the highest mountain between Nanda Devi and Kamet. As it makes up part of the outer wall of the Nanda Devi sanctuary access is difficult from the south. And the northern side...3,000 metres of steep ice and rock which speaks for itself. Add to

2 Stone, M. 1979, ‘On the shortcomings of Kodachrome’, *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 32, pp. 60–1.

this description the mountain's record with mountaineers—six deaths and two severe cases of frost-bite against only four ascents. All in all a formidable picture. What were a bunch of Australian rockclimbers doing there in the first place?³

As Cocker noted, however, the 'choice' of Dunagiri had not been a choice at all:

Dunagiri was never on our list of possible mountains. It was allocated to us by the Indian authorities. There was no consultation with the expedition regarding the suitability of this mountain. Dunagiri is a big mountain; it's an impressive mountain. Its west face is one of the biggest precipices in the world. It is a climbers' mountain with many fantastic challenges. The Tasker–Renshaw route was described by them as being two Walker Spurs, one on top of the other, six thousand feet of extreme climbing...I would never have chosen Dunagiri as an objective for an expedition of this level of experience. It took us so long to get permission to climb in India that as a result there was no question of changing the mountain allocated by the Indians.⁴

The first task facing this bunch of Australian rock climbers as they approached the formidable peak was load carrying. To climb the mountain in the traditional fashion, a string of camps had to be established and supplied and to safeguard the passage of load carriers, ropes had to be fixed over the more difficult sections of the route. Although the load carrying was simply hard work, lead climbers had to negotiate some difficult terrain to fix the ropes for the subsequent carries.

The first part of the route proceeded straightforwardly. A 'dump' camp was established partway up the Ramani Glacier and then a 'cave' camp, in which tents were erected in a natural rock cave, at the top of the glacier. Beyond this, a steep headwall of snow, requiring some fixed ropes, led to the third camp on a col. Bell and Massy led the bottom section of the headwall and Baldwin and Sher Singh finished off the work to the col.

Above col camp, the climbing became even more difficult. A buttress—first of moderately angled snow and then of very steep rock—led towards the South-West Ridge. Beyond the steep rock, the angle of the buttress eased somewhat and it became a series of ice fields with patches of broken rock. Teams of climbers went up above col camp to systematically fix ropes up the buttress. Hooy and Stone fixed the snow slopes just above the camp and Hall and Macartney-Snape pushed the route through the steep rock band before retiring to base camp for a rest. Above the steep rock, however, the climbing bogged down. Several teams, including Bell and Massy and a rested Hooy and Stone, had a go, but none could make much headway up the ice fields. The fixed ropes stopped at about 6500 m, a few hundred metres below the South-West (summit) Ridge. An impasse had been reached.

3 Hall, L. 1979, 'Dunagiri', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 32, pp. 57–9.

4 P. Cocker, Correspondence.

With time inexorably rolling on towards the onset of the monsoon and the climbers banging their heads against a virtual altitude barrier at 6500 m, the prospects for success looked dim. Most climbers blamed the weather but expedition leader, Peter Cocker, realised that a lack of time for proper acclimatisation was probably a bigger factor:

Delays of almost a week in Delhi and further delays in Joshimath over the availability of porters had eaten into our schedule. The team launched themselves vigorously into the assault well before they had acclimatised. Many of the team pushed themselves to their limits. Ken Bell blacked out while fixing ropes at 18 000 feet. He was lucky to have had Charlie Massy as his partner; Charlie was able to hold his unexpected fall.⁵

Cocker, however, still had an ace up his sleeve. John Finnigan, one of the team's most experienced, motivated and skilled climbers, had missed the departure because of the pressures of his PhD studies and the birth of his daughter, but had arrived just about the time the climbers had established col camp and were beginning the push up the buttress. Hopefully, Finnigan, the acknowledged 'hard man' of the team, could break through the impasse.

Finnigan's solo trip through India and his rushed trek to base camp had not been easy. He had been left some administrative tasks to tidy up with Indian authorities, one of which was to complete the paperwork for the importation of the radios. It took all the cleverness the crafty Finnigan could muster to get the radios, which had already been sneaked in, officially approved.

'I had to rewrite the laws of physics to get the radios approved,' he recalled:

I dictated a long letter to some clerk in the Communications Administration explaining how we could change the frequency of the crystals in our radios by tuning them. I invented a whole new science of electronics to do it. This guy wrote it down religiously and it went onto a pile of correspondence stacked on his desk to the height of his shoulder. On the other side of his desk was a pile of the same height, and, to each side of those, were other piles, which started at the floor and reached the same height. Correspondence slowly moved across his desk, and my letter went to the far pile. It would probably be another 10 years before my letter reached the out tray.⁶

That was not the end of Finnigan's troubles with the Indian authorities. In the few weeks between the main group's and Finnigan's arrival, a diplomatic row had erupted over allegations of misconduct by an American mountaineering expedition to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary some years earlier. The Indian Government alleged that the American mountaineers were in fact Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) agents and had planted a nuclear-powered listening device on the summit of Nanda Devi or Nanda Kot, a nearby mountain, to monitor China's nuclear weapons testing

⁵ P. Cocker, Interview.

⁶ J. J. Finnigan, Interview.

program. The device had subsequently been avalanched off the mountain and into the headwaters of the holy Ganges River, where alleged nuclear contamination was causing a national uproar. The Indian Government placed a ban on all expeditions going into the area—fortunately just after the main ANU team had left Joshimath, their jumping off point for the trek. Finnigan eluded the ban by claiming that he was not part of an expedition but simply an individual mountain walker.

Finally out of the clutches of the Delhi bureaucracy, Finnigan hired a car and driver and compressed the normal two to three-day trip to Joshimath into 18 bone-rattling hours. ‘I had my first view of Himalayan mountains,’ Finnigan remembered fondly, ‘when I got out along the side of the road for a vomit.’⁷

Trying to save more time, he pushed the trek into base camp as hard as he could and finished it with a two-day push from 1500 m on the riverbed to nearly 4600 m at base camp. If ever there was a sure recipe for altitude sickness, that was it.

I felt all right at first. Then I went to sleep in one of the tents and woke up a few hours later with an unbelievable migraine headache. It was one of the most miserable nights of my life: bouts of vomiting and a paralysing headache. It was an early introduction to altitude sickness. I remember hauling myself out of the tent in the early hours of the morning and propping myself up between two rocks, just below base camp, which had a convenient hole to one side so I could lean over when I became ill. Every time I vomited it felt like the top of my head was blowing off.⁸

That episode slowed the ambitious Finnigan and he adopted a more moderate schedule of acclimatisation for the next few weeks. By the time he was able to climb comfortably to col camp, he had done so much load carrying that he was in need of a rest, not a round of hard climbing above 6500 m. The impasse remained.

It was getting on towards the end of May and things were getting desperate. Virtually no progress had been made for many days. Cocker pushed up to col camp to see whether he could break through the upper icefields and onto the summit ridge. Up at the high camp, he discovered that an important factor contributing to the impasse was that most basic of high-altitude problems—lack of adequate food and drink—which slowed and stopped so many Himalayan expeditions.

The group had taken only one type of stove—a kerosene-burning one—to use high on the mountain and they proved to be extremely difficult to keep going. The problem was most likely due to the combination of small fuel jets and low-grade kerosene. Even Macartney-Snape, somewhat of an expert at stove maintenance, could not get the stoves to work reliably. As a consequence, it was virtually impossible for

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

climbers resident in col camp to get adequate fluids and they invariably had to climb the most difficult part of the mountain in a dehydrated state. ‘Only the ingenious Martin Stone was able to get regular use out of the stoves,’ Cocker recalled.⁹

Other factors affected the team’s health. The glacial water, unless it was boiled religiously, would play havoc with even the toughest digestive system. The heavily processed foods imported from Australia could also have contributed to ill health and there was some evidence that those who opted for the local fare of chappatis and curry remained healthier (or at least did not suffer from constipation!).

Some members, however, claimed that their health was compromised by the cooking arrangements at base camp. The expedition had hired a well-known and well-respected cook, but, on joining the trip, he decided that he would rather be the mail runner. One of the kitchen boys was elevated to cook and he proved to be a disaster. Not only was his food barely edible, according to some of the members, his hygiene left much to be desired. The team eventually persuaded him that he needed to regularly wash and dry the plates, bowls and cutlery, but then discovered that he used the tea towel as a turban between meals! Climbers descending to base camp for a rest sometimes became sick instead.

At one point, all expedition members at base camp reported that they were suffering from violent stomach upsets. Cocker, who was up the mountain, quickly descended. The chef explained that the sahibs were insatiable and had overindulged in the onion pakoras that he could not turn out fast enough. As a result, the onions were undercooked. Constipation was not a problem! The next day, they had all recovered so there was no real Delhi belly on this particular occasion.

The final straw was the increasing occurrence of heavy afternoon snowfalls, which were consistent with reports that the monsoon had arrived early. It looked as if the mountain had won. Physical exhaustion and the arrival of porters to carry the expedition gear back out prompted an extensive afternoon radio conference in late May. The group reluctantly had to admit that they had given Dunagiri their best shot and it was time to pack up and go home.

At the end of the meeting, Macartney-Snape and Hall contacted Cocker from base camp and a further discussion ensued. Macartney-Snape and Hall volunteered to go back up the mountain to retrieve gear and rope, but the pair had also discussed going up to the summit ridge and exploring further towards the summit if the weather looked good.

Cocker further suggested that if they came up the mountain and were able to progress further to the summit ridge, he would then ask expedition members to volunteer to support one final attempt on the summit. Macartney-Snape and Hall

9 P. Cocker, Interview and correspondence.

readily agreed. Cocker added, ‘They were rested, fit and raring to go. They had acclimatised and really wanted to go for something. There was no way that they wanted to go back empty-handed.’¹⁰

Cocker continued:

If Lincoln and Tim climbed to the summit ridge and then returned to col camp that day, I planned to ask for support from base camp (more food, working stoves plus fuel). As the support climbers raced up, Tim, Lincoln and I would return to the summit ridge, Tim and Lincoln would go for the top, I’d stay on the ridge and dig an ice cave and prepare for their return, and, if needed, help them down.¹¹

Early on the morning of 29 May, Macartney-Snape and Hall set out from cave camp to climb up onto the buttress and hopefully to the summit ridge. They stopped briefly at col camp for breakfast and a quick chat with Cocker, who had decided to remain in camp for the day. They then climbed higher up to the top of the fixed ropes. For once, the afternoon snow squalls stayed away and they began to think about the last-ditch push for the top.

Hall said:

When Tim and I left camp at 5:30am, we had no intention of going for the summit, but when we reached the top of the fixed rope, the weather was better than it had ever been before, so we decided to push on up to the summit ridge. As we climbed, the idea of continuing to the summit became firm in our minds, but the decision to go for the top was not made until we were at the start of the summit ridge.¹²

Even then, there was no possibility of reaching the summit that day as it was still more than 1 km away and a few hundred vertical metres above. They would have to spend the night out in the open on the ridge—something they were barely equipped to do. They had brought with them sleeping pads, down jackets and bivvy bags, but no tent, stove or sleeping-bags. They had one water bottle each and minimal food—some energy bars, chocolate and a tin of cherries—which they shared. It was a most uncomfortable night for the pair, as their feet had become wet during the day’s climbing due to interior condensation in their leather boots. Hall warmed his feet on Macartney-Snape’s stomach during the night, and vice versa, which probably staved off frostbite.

In the morning, the weather still looked good, but the decision to go for the summit was not clear-cut. Hall knew that his feet were in trouble and he would very likely suffer frostbite if he continued on towards the summit. Furthermore, they had no water and no means of obtaining it. It would be a long, hard, dry day. Not only

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Sheppard, T. 1984, ‘Lincoln Hall, Everest mountaineer’, in *Australian Adventurers*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, pp. 3–14.

would they have to climb a long, dangerous ridge in a severely dehydrated state, they would have to find the stamina to somehow get themselves back down. Despite these odds, they went for the top.

The alarm bells started to ring for Cocker immediately he realised that Macartney-Snape and Hall were going for the summit. He was responsible for this group of young university students, a group that had become much closer than most large expedition teams. A tragedy would have shattered the team.

Cocker said:

I was astounded when they went directly for the summit, and was aghast that they were making the attempt so ill prepared. It was a very risky, really a very foolhardy thing to do. I was even more concerned because a previous night I had dreamt about two going to the summit and not coming back.¹³

Cocker immediately radioed Charlie Massy expressing his concerns:

These guys are really gutsy but the risks are enormous. I am really concerned about what is happening. They are probably already dehydrated, Charlie. Choose whoever you want as a partner and please come up with a working stove and some food. I think we may need to be prepared for a rescue.¹⁴

Massy set off with Theo Hooy, bivvying that night at the site of the already dismantled dump camp. Massy, who was deputy leader of the expedition, was, in Cocker's mind, the perfect support: 'During the entire expedition, I could rely on Charlie 100 per cent.'¹⁵

Nevertheless, there was plenty of enthusiasm for the attempt, as Cocker recalled: 'When they came out from the bivouac and headed for the summit, there was this massive cheer on the radio. The excitement was tremendous. All day the reports were coming up...moving slowly...can't see them...can see only one of them now... moving very slow.'¹⁶

The reports were coming from base camp, where the other climbers had binoculars trained on the summit ridge all day. What they were really seeing, however, was not a person but a 'rainbow'—a point of diffraction, where the sun hit thin clouds of snow crystals kicked up by the climbers. On occasion, when a strong gust of wind swept across the ridge, larger plumes of snow indicated the climbers' position.

Up on the ridge itself it was hard going for Macartney-Snape and Hall (see images 7.4 and 7.5). Soft snow covered hard ice on both sides of the ridge and the north side was periodically corniced. After a tortuous morning negotiating the tricky ridge

13 P. Cocker, Interview and correspondence.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

and the occasional cornice or rock that forced them off it, the two climbers reached the last snow slope leading to the summit itself. Hall was exhausted and decided to rest while Macartney-Snape continued on alone to the summit. Just after midday on 30 May, the ANUMC expedition had managed to put one climber on top of Dunagiri, after it appeared a few days earlier that the situation was beyond hope.

There was still the descent, however, and many of the team were haunted by the American tragedy on the same route just a year earlier. Anxieties rose further when the weather turned bad. By the late afternoon, the summit ridge was hit by a violent electrical storm followed by high winds that reduced visibility. Macartney-Snape and Hall, racked by exhaustion and dehydration, doggedly pushed on and reached the end of the summit ridge just as darkness was setting in. A few harrowing abseils later, the pair was at the top of the fixed ropes, where they separated as it would be safer to descend the fixed ropes individually.

Meanwhile at col camp, Cocker was becoming increasingly anxious about the fate of the two young climbers. It was already dark. They were into their second night out on the mountain and they had no tent, sleeping-bags or stove. And worse, they had not had any water for at least 36 hours. About 11pm, Macartney-Snape arrived, with news that he had made the summit and that Hall was just behind. The time went by, however, and Hall still did not appear. Cocker feared the worst. Undeterred by a blizzard that was raging on the col, Cocker went out at 1.30am to search for Hall. After a slow but very eventful trip up the fixed ropes, Cocker heard a voice, but he could not see anyone! Hall suddenly appeared from nowhere. He had spent some time in the open, on the rocky ledges above the ropes, and was clearly cold and disoriented. Hall did not recognise Cocker, thinking he was Ken Bell. Hall was attempting to warm up his frozen fingers. It was time to start down the ropes. Cocker delayed his descent until Lincoln had reached the anchor and was off rope. While Lincoln was very slow in attaching his figure of eight descender at the anchors, he was very deliberate in his actions. The pair descended to the safety and relative comfort of the tent.

In a dramatic, last-ditch effort, Dunagiri had been climbed, but not without cost. Although Macartney-Snape escaped with a minor case of frostnip, Hall was in much worse shape. In addition to some blistering on his fingers, he had sustained major frostbite to several of his toes during the slow descent through the night. Many of the other climbers watching the dramatic summit attempt from base camp realised almost immediately that the pair would likely need help on the descent. Most aware of the potential problems was the experienced Cocker and he had already organised a rescue operation as the two summiters were slowly working their way back along the summit ridge and down the fixed ropes.

To the top of Dunagiri

Lincoln Hall

The next morning was cloudless but windy. We realised we were not to have a repeat of the previous day's perfect weather. The first problem for the day (apart from the absence of breakfast) was a huge cornice. We floundered through thigh deep snow on the southern slope until it was safe to regain the ridge. My feet gave up the struggle against the cold, and went completely numb. My oxygen-starved mind worried only about the climbing and forgot about my feet.

The hardest section of the ridge followed. Granite boulders blocked the crest, and turning them was a slow and often frightening process. Shortly after midday we reached the bottom of the big summit dome formed by the intersection of the mountain's four main ridge systems. We decided to unrope and proceed at our own pace. After staggering a few steps I collapsed for a rest. We were dehydrated and exhausted, and I was beginning to doubt whether I would have the energy to return along the ridge. The only choice was to sit where I was, and recover as best I could. Tim plodded on, up towards the summit. Exactly an hour later he returned. He had succeeded but was too exhausted even to speak.

Storm clouds were gathering in the north, so we could only afford fifteen minutes rest. Fortunately we climbed the most difficult section before the storm hit us. Static electricity literally immobilised us—whenever we tried to move we crumpled up in pain from electric shocks. We were very frightened, imagining that at any moment we would be roasted by lightning [sic]. After a few minutes the electric part of the storm moved on and we were able to continue our descent. The wind blew snow from the ridge into our faces so that we couldn't see anything. We had to feel for the ridge with our ice-axes, all the while crouching to avoid being blown off the ridge completely.

Just on dark we reached the end of the summit ridge. Luckily we had no trouble finding the spare rope we had left there for abseiling. The four abseils to the fixed ropes took several hours. We could not find anchors in the rotten rock. The ropes became jammed twice, my fingers were clumsy with frost-bite, and our minds worked at quarter-speed because of the cold, the altitude, and the lack of food, water and sleep. Tim reached the fixed ropes first, and he began to abseil while I pulled down the climbing ropes and coiled them. He arrived at the top camp at 6,000 m some hours before I did. It was 7:00 am before I dragged my body with its frost-bitten hands and feet into the warm, sheltered, soup-containing Omnipotent.

From 'Dunagiri', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 32 (1979), pp. 57–8.

Midnight search

Peter Cocker

By 10.30pm, I'd given up hope of seeing Tim and Lincoln that night. The storm was intensifying and was roaring across the rock prow. I stored bottles of melted snow inside my sleeping bag. I spoke to Charlie [Massy], bivvying 3000 ft lower down. We agreed that at first light I'd go up to find Tim and Linc and he and Theo [Hooy] would move up at full steam.

I found it impossible to sleep. The whole scenario was identical to a dream I'd had in which two climbers failed to return from a summit bid—not a rare event in the Himalaya. The tension made me feel sick; a second night out would, at the least, mean some frostbite... I said a short prayer. Imagine saying a prayer for a couple of heathens like Tim and Linc! Well, it worked for me, as I fell asleep.

I awoke to hear the furious jangling of the aluminium snow stakes hanging from the other tent. I couldn't believe it. The storm was now hammering Col Camp in spite of its superbly protected location.

The clashing of the snow stakes continued, yet something didn't gel. The noise was too erratic. Pulling on my boots, I crawled outside expecting to find a lynx trapped in the other tent. It was too dark to see anything, so I grabbed a torch. Its beam picked up a large creature, six-foot-three, standing silently behind the spare tent.

'Tim! Am I glad to see you!'

'Not half as glad as I am to see you!'

He later explained that on arriving at the col, the tents had apparently disappeared. (They were buried under a foot of snow.) He thought he and Linc had been abandoned. This was an indication of the grimness of the ordeal he'd just been through.

He assured me Linc was close behind. In the tent I gave him a drink, took off his boots and radioed Charlie at Dump Camp and the team at base camp with the good news. Charlie wanted to know if they'd reached the summit. It had never entered my head to ask! Tim replied that they had, but he was hesitant. He found it difficult to explain that Linc's frozen feet had prevented him from climbing the last slope to the summit. For Tim, this was the only thing that seemed to mar their inspiring achievement.

No sign of Linc. I yelled and whistled, no reply. I started climbing the fixed ropes to meet him, but my hands became so cold they would not function. I couldn't grip the ascenders; my thumbs were locked in a painless cramp. I returned to the tent. Tim pointed out that there was little I could do if I did find him. My fear was that Linc may have stopped to rest and then fallen asleep. I put on more clothing and strapped on my crampons, ensuring that the straps went under the laces, as the straps supplied were not the ones specified by the makers.

This time I moved up the fixed ropes quickly. I was surprised at how far the rope hung away from the rock face. My headlamp provided the only light, but most of the time its beam was lost in the void.

Then my left crampon came off, dangling from the strap and spinning wildly in the storm. As I bent down to retrieve it, a rope sling I was using slipped down, only to be snared by the furiously gyrating crampon. In a matter of seconds I was looking at an incredible tangle, the sort of thing that happens only in a Tom and Jerry cartoon. My first reaction was amazement, then embarrassment, [and I was] thankful that no-one could see my predicament. Dangling upside down and spinning in space, I finally appreciated the humour of the situation. All climbers should carry a pocketknife. Never know when you need to cut the rope! No single slash for this Gordian knot, but surgical snips with the greatest of care (Linc would never forgive me if I cut the wrong rope).

The higher I progressed the more I was impressed by the skill of the team who fixed the ropes. I rarely touched the rock. I lost sense of time. The storm eased a little. The stars began to fill the sky. As always, I was surprised that a million stars give no real light.

There was an unreal feeling about ascending a free-hanging rope in the dark, and it was easy to become disorientated. This feeling was enhanced when I caught a glimpse of a fiery light high above me. I lost sight of it as I rotated on the rope. When I got a better look, I was mesmerised; I was looking at a 'volcano'. The summit of Nanda Devi glowed like the inside of a furnace. The rock was molten. I searched the sky but found not a hint of dawn; the rest of the world was in darkness. I turned back to look at Nanda Devi. Seeing is believing. The summit was of 'burning lava'. I again searched the sky for signs of dawn, for this was the only explanation for this incredibly beautiful illusion, but there was not even a tinge of dawn light. I felt aggravated knowing that what I could see couldn't exist. Nanda Devi means Goddess of Joy in Hindi, and this was the mountain she had chosen as her throne. That I could understand.

The next time I looked, the summit had turned to burning gold and dawn light started to douse the stars. Streaks of green light preceded the sun's emergence. It was as though I was hanging on the edge of space. Kalanka emerged from the night, followed by the monolithic Changabang. The mountains turned from grey to shades of pink, blue and gold. At that precise moment I was convinced that no other being on our planet was in a more spectacular position and privileged to view such a magnificent spectacle. Base camp was still buried in the dark of night 6000 ft below.

Nearing the top section of the prow, I glanced upwards to see that the rope had become snagged some five metres to the left of the line of ascent. It was caught in a small niche on a large overhanging shelf. To continue up would force the rope to free itself and run across the sharp edge of the overhang, damaging the rope, and perhaps even severing it. I took stock of the situation and was quite comfortable about my decision. I didn't want to be anywhere else; I didn't want to be doing anything else. I just wanted up.

By the time I reached the anchors, Lincoln was descending the second abseil. During the third abseil, I paused beneath an overhang and noticed that the section of rope immediately in front of my face had a deep gash in it exposing its core. I then realised that the incident when the rope was caught in the niche on my ascent was a closer call than I had realised. It was a good thing ours was the last trip down the fixed rope!

I made sure that Linc attached his abseil device correctly to the fixed rope. Lincoln then abseiled slowly into the void. I gave him a few minutes to make sure that he was safely off this section of rope before I proceeded down. I then attached myself to the rope and abseiled after Lincoln.

After about three hours of jumaring, I reached the top of the prow. There was no sign of Linc, but I could hear a strange mumbling. I whistled and he appeared from nowhere. The mumbling was Linc 'talking to his fingers'. 'Cool hand Linc' in more ways than one! He was smiling. Same Linc, unflappable.

I watched Linc and tried to assess his condition. He appeared quite normal except for his actions, which were very slow but precise. Lincoln later told me he thought I was Ken Bell.

When the rope did free itself, I was unprepared and surprised at how far I fell before stopping. For the next minute or so I bounced up and down on the rope, but it appeared undamaged. Waiting for the yo-yoing to stop, I amused myself by calculating where I would have ended up had the rope been severed. The spectacular trip would have ended 4000 ft down the mountain in a huge crevasse. It was [in] this crevasse that Dick Renshaw and Joe Tasker had buried the four luckless American climbers from the previous expedition. During our stay on Dunagiri, they were often in our minds, and some of us felt a special affinity towards them.

We continued down the remaining fixed ropes without incident and were soon back at the tents where Tim gave Lincoln his first drink in well over 36 hours. As Linc sat in the entrance of the tent, I removed his boots, and invited him to place his frostbitten feet under my jumper and against my stomach as we sat in the sun. I am not sure it helped much.

Within an hour, Charlie and Theo arrived with the new stove and more food. As soon as Andrew Blakers and Dr Mark arrived, Tim, Theo and I set off down the fixed ropes to Cave Camp. We then roped up for the descent down the Ramani Glacier, moving with care as the crevasses were just beginning to open up. Some of the advance rescue group were already on the way up to bivvy at Cave Camp that night and were at Dump Camp by the time we arrived. They were in high spirits and cheered Tim for his remarkable ascent and survival.

It was a great day, a great feeling, everyone was smiling. Tim swore he was finished with mountaineering and was sticking to his beloved cross-country skiing! Still no sign of Ben's early monsoon. Dunagiri is a very beautiful mountain, I must come back.

When Cocker and Hall arrived back at the tent at col camp early on the morning of 31 May, the rescue operation was already well under way (see image 7.6). First up, arriving about 11am, were Charlie Massy and Theo Hooy, followed two hours later by Andrew Blakers and Mark Podkolinski, the expedition doctor, who had climbed all the way from base camp to the col in a single day.

Hooy saw firsthand the evidence of Macartney-Snape and Hall's desperate 49-hour push to the summit and back down: 'These guys were totally, totally exhausted. And Lincoln was obviously frostbitten. We let Tim have a sleep for another two hours and then Peter and I escorted him down to cave camp.'¹⁷

Soon after the first of the rescue party arrived at col camp, more of their colleagues, including John Finnigan, Martin Stone and Ken Baldwin, followed. Finnigan and Stone had improvised a makeshift stretcher/sled device from rucksack frames and, while the others stripped the col camp, they carefully strapped Hall, still in his sleeping-bag, to the sled.

¹⁷ T. Hooy, Interview.

With Finnigan lowering from the belay points above and Stone guiding the sled down the slope, Hall began the final leg of his trip down the mountain. The lowering operation down the fixed ropes went surprisingly smoothly, so smoothly, in fact, that the relaxed Hall was spouting a steady stream of the puns and one-liners for which he was so well known among the others. In jest, Baldwin and a couple of the other climbers threatened to cut him loose and let him slide down the mountain on his own if he continued cracking these appalling jokes. Banter like that was undoubtedly useful in relieving some of the apprehension that had built up during the previous two days.

Cocker realised the importance of getting Hall to a hospital as soon as possible, so he had organised a series of relay rescue teams. Cocker was determined to get Hall down to base camp in a single day, no matter what.

At the bottom of the fixed ropes, reinforcements were at hand. Nearly every member of the Dunagiri team had climbed back up onto the mountain to assist in the rescue. And, as it turned out, they were needed. Below the fixed ropes, the operation, if anything, became more difficult. The slope was nearly as steep and there were no ropes in place to assist in the control of the sled. Down they went, still having to put in belays but also on occasion having to help drag the sled down the slope. The final segment of the journey to cave camp was even more tortuous, as they had to manhandle the sled over rocky moraine.

At cave camp, the exhausted climbers—many of whom had not fully recovered from their own stints on the mountain—were met by a group of able-bodied porters whom Cocker had organised to finish the operation. For triple pay, they were to get Hall down to base camp as quickly as possible. With an incentive like that, the strong men of the Garhwal raced Hall, who had been transferred to a proper stretcher, all the way down the Ramani Glacier to dump camp by the end of the day.

McCartney-Snape and Cocker had arrived at dump camp where McCartney-Snape received a rousing reception. Cocker still feels the moment: ‘The morale was incredibly high. Everyone was over the moon. It was a highly charged and emotional scene. We had the spare climbers and porters ready to carry Lincoln down the last and longest leg to base camp.’¹⁸

All of the climbers arrived at base camp by dark, thus completing a remarkable day in which they not only got Hall down all the way from col camp at just more than 6000 m, they completely stripped the mountain of most of the gear. Somehow they found the energy to celebrate their triumph.

18 P. Cocker, Correspondence.

The next day, about 4pm, Cocker and Sher Singh were literally running down the mountain to Joshimath, and 26 hours later had arrived at their destination. Cocker made his way to the army base where he met the commanding officer and explained that a helicopter was required for the rescue of Lincoln Hall. The brigadier advised them that he would not be able to act until he was authorised by his superiors and that they would not act until an official request was forthcoming from the Australian High Commission.

Cocker was extremely surprised when an Indian sergeant knocked at his door at 7 that evening and instructed him, 'Sahib, please be ready at 7 o'clock sharp tomorrow morning. A jeep will pick you up.' With that, he saluted, turned on his heel and disappeared.

The next morning, Cocker jumped into the jeep and was driven to a flat piece of ground where a party awaited him. The brigadier, two army surgeons, two bearers—one serving tea and the other holding a silver tray of delicately cut sandwiches—greeted the elated Cocker. The brigadier informed him that the helicopter was on its way.

Cocker suspected that H. C. Sarin, President of the Indian Mountaineering Foundation and a close friend of Arthur Tang (the former Australian High Commissioner to India), was responsible for the prompt arrival of the rescue helicopter. Tang, who was a personal acquaintance of Cocker's, had previously contacted Sarin from Australia and asked if he could keep an eye on the Australian expedition and assist them if they needed it.

The helicopter arrived and landed on the tee-off for hole one on the tiny Joshimath golf course. The pilot, a towering Sikh with a big grin on his face, was famous throughout India for his daring rescues. The brigadier, Cocker and the pilot then discussed the situation, the pilot expressing his concern that he would not be able to find base camp because the weather was closing in and that he would return the next day. Cocker hastened to assure the pilot that he could guide him in to base camp.

Cocker jumped into the helicopter, the engine roared and the machine lifted off, tipping into a hair-raising dive into the Ganges Gorge before picking up speed in one thrilling swoop up the Ganges. A short while later, the helicopter landed at base camp, where Hall was waiting with Macartney-Snape and the liaison officer and his porters. Hall and his gear were loaded in and the helicopter returned immediately to Joshimath.

The sympathetic and attentive local surgeons examined Hall and decided that he required expert treatment at the Bareilly military hospital south-east of Delhi. Hall was summarily transferred back into the helicopter and whisked off for the

hospital—only four days after he had been struggling along the summit ridge of Dunagiri. A few months after his return to Australia, Hall lost parts of two toes to frostbite.

The expedition was over and the Dunagiri success was splashed across the front pages of Sydney and Canberra newspapers. In fact, during the lead-up to the trip and during the expedition itself, the team's activities were covered very heavily in the press; some 46 major articles appeared in newspapers and magazines around Australia.

Such heavy media sponsorship was essential for the penniless students in getting the Dunagiri expedition off the ground. As noted earlier, however, such sponsorship does not come without strings attached. There is always the potential for climbers, particularly inexperienced ones, to be tempted into trying something they should not.

It was a problem that had confronted even Peter Taylor, the solo climber of Langtang II in 1963. Even though the publicity for his trip had been modest by Dunagiri standards, he felt somewhat threatened by it.

Taylor recalled:

There were newspaper interviews; this was much easier [than television]. The only thing that bothered me was the fact that I might start trying to live up to my publicity. I might be tempted to try the impossible if I felt public attention focussed on me. It was an uneasy feeling.¹⁹

Although the potential for such problems was certainly there, they never materialised on Dunagiri. Despite a few minor misunderstandings, and one major one between the reporter Sandilands and Cocker late in the expedition, the trip was generally free of serious troubles caused by the journalistic obligations. As for the students being sucked into attempting the impossible, Baldwin reported that they felt no pressure whatsoever: 'We were quite happy to take the money and run.'²⁰

Sandilands was an experienced, dedicated and hardworking journalist, as the number of detailed reports he sent to Australia testified. In doggedly pursuing some of his stories, however, he did not always see eye-to-eye with Cocker on some aspects of the expedition, which prompted Cocker to quip at one point: 'Ben's interests were not always the same as my interests. As a companion, he was bloody great; as a journalist, he was bloody devious.'²¹

19 Taylor, P. 1964, *Coopers Creek to Langtang II*, Rigby, Adelaide, p. 101.

20 K. G. Baldwin, Interview.

21 P. Cocker, Interview.

For his part, Sandilands seemed to relish the odd run-in with one of the climbers: ‘I just don’t seem to notice personality problems; I have very thick skin...I greatly valued the company and respect of the other climbers. Perhaps Peter [Cocker] and I did have an occasional harsh word, but we parted good friends at the end of the trip.’²²

The young Dunagiri climbers were also guinea pigs in a medical research experiment. Although Diamox, a diuretic, is now often used to alleviate the unpleasant symptoms—nausea, headache, loss of appetite, lethargy—of altitude sickness, in 1978, the notion of using a drug to prevent or reduce altitude sickness was still relatively novel. To help the research along, the Dunagiri climbers volunteered to test a promising drug, such as Diamox. Half of the climbers were given the diuretic and the others a placebo.

This medical experiment did a great deal to enhance what Theo Hooy called ‘the cult of the pee bottle’.²³ Basic bodily functions, such as urination—which most of us take for granted in our daily lives—become important, and often dreaded, events in the world of high-altitude mountaineering. There is nothing worse than having to crawl out of a warm sleeping-bag in the middle of the night during a blizzard and then, while trying to keep from being blown off a high ridge, fumbling through innumerable layers of bulky clothing with frozen and clumsy hands just to relieve oneself. To avoid such uncomfortable situations, climbers often urinate into 1-litre plastic bottles and then empty the contents in the morning. Pee bottles have become standard equipment, as Hooy points out: ‘I’m personally convinced they’re one of the most important pieces of equipment a climber can have.’²⁴

The experimental use of diuretics on the Dunagiri trip added a new dimension to the use of pee bottles. Hooy remembered:

Martin Stone was sharing a tent with me...we used to lie in our sleeping-bags and wait for the sun to melt the hoarfrost, and then we could go outside without getting a shower. Early one morning the sun was just on the tent and I was quite enjoying the sun’s rays warming the air, when there was a muffled scream from Martin and this thing went hurtling out of the tent like a grenade. His pee bottle had frozen and split during the night, and the solid contents were becoming liquid.²⁵

Stone was obviously one of the test group, although the climbers were not told what they had been given. ‘None of us knew who was in what group,’ Ken Baldwin explained:

22 B. Sandilands, interview.

23 T. Hooy, Interview.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

except that some of us peed and the rest of us didn't. Not only that, but some of the ones that peed a lot had quite erotic dreams in full colour. I remember being in a tent with one of the people that were peeing a lot. We were given 1-litre pee bottles, and that's a lot of pee. You'd, of course, start with them empty in the evening. I can remember him sitting up in his sleeping bag one night and I could hear the sound of the pee bottle filling up, the pitch getting higher and higher and higher...until all of a sudden the sound stopped with a cry 'Oh my God!'.²⁶

Hooy added:

In fact, it became a bit like the International Everest Expedition in the early Twenties where people frequently discussed various bodily functions. The topic of our discussions became 'how many ccs?', and how many people broke the 1-litre barrier. You almost started to classify people in terms of whether they were musical or practical. You had the ones who judged by the change in the pitch as the volume increased or the ones who worked from the dipstick principle.²⁷

The diuretic experiment had its serious side as well. Although it was hoped the drug would improve a climber's performance by reducing the debilitating symptoms of altitude sickness, it probably retarded performance by flushing even more fluids out of bodies already prone to dehydration.

As a postscript to the Dunagiri expedition, John Finnigan's casual remark that it would take 10 years for a piece of correspondence to move from an Indian clerk's in-tray to his out-tray was uncannily close to the mark. More than nine years after Lincoln Hall was flown to the hospital at Bareilly, the ANUMC received a bill from the Indian Government for the helicopter rescue.

Showing the way

So how significant was the ANUMC's Dunagiri climb to the development of Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya?

In many ways, the Dunagiri expedition was clearly the most important of the early Australian expeditions to the Himalaya. Perhaps the most important contribution the ANUMC team made to Australian high-altitude climbing was to break a psychological barrier—that of the ability of young Australian climbers to organise and carry out a major, difficult Himalayan expedition (see image 7.7).

The importance of psychological barriers in climbing cannot be overestimated. Anyone who has led rock climbs—that is, gone up first with the rope behind him—knows that it is far easier to cope psychologically with a climb, even a hard one,

²⁶ K. G. Baldwin, Interview.

²⁷ T. Hooy, Interview.

if it has been done before compared with a first ascent. Eric Shipton noted this phenomenon on the first ascent of Mt Kenya, when certain segments of the climb or sequences of moves seemed much harder to Shipton than they would have ordinarily simply because he did not know what lay ahead.

In Himalayan mountaineering, the biggest psychological barrier was undoubtedly the use of artificial oxygen to ascend Everest. Although the necessity of supplemental oxygen was debated vigorously in the 1920s and 1930s, the oxygen-assisted ascent in 1953 by Hillary and Tenzing put up an enormous psychological barrier that was not broken until 1978, when Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler fought their way desperately up the 1953 route without the aid of bottled oxygen. Soon thereafter more and more climbers battled their way to the top of Everest without the help of oxygen. Once they knew it was possible, once that tremendous mental barrier had been broken, it became more manageable, although still terribly demanding physically.

Although the ANUMC Dunagiri expedition was not the first Australian expedition to the Himalaya, it was the one that showed the way for many groups of young Australian climbers. With its extensive publicity and its team primarily of young university students, it invited other climbers to ask themselves, 'If a group of young students can go climb in the Himalaya, why can't we?' People who had perhaps considered going to the Himalaya realised that you did not have to be a well-known Continental, British or American climber to go there.

In that way, the effect the Dunagiri trip had on Australian Himalayan climbing was much like the impact Bill Packard's inclusion on Tilman's 1950 trip to Annapurna had on New Zealand mountaineers. Despite being very accomplished climbers in their home ranges, many New Zealanders had previously considered themselves not quite up to Himalayan mountaineering standards. Then, as Packard recalled with some amusement, several of his New Zealand colleagues said, 'Look at Packard. He's been invited on a Tilman expedition, and Packard's not a crash-hot climber.'²⁸

In addition to its psychological effect, the Dunagiri expedition was noteworthy simply for its achievement. Dunagiri is a big mountain, difficult and dangerous by any route, as its record of successful ascents and accidents proves. Indeed, Peter Cocker reiterated after the trip that

Dunagiri is not a good mountain to start out on. That ridge—the South-West Ridge—is too long and exposed and the faces are steep and difficult. And so many people have been killed on Dunagiri.

28 W. Packard, Interview.

In the Himalaya, ascent routes rarely follow sky-line ridges. These long ridges make the descent as arduous as the ascent, never offering the option to abseil and exposed to the weather with often no chance of shelter. The big ridges of the Himalaya are the equivalent of the big north faces of the European Alps. That is why they are usually the last routes to be climbed.²⁹

The young ANU climbers, however, met the challenge to make only the fourth ascent of the mountain. Their climb of Dunagiri stood for five years—despite a rapidly increasing number of Australian expeditions to the Himalaya during that period—as the highest mountain, and the only one more than 7000 m, climbed by an Australian expedition (see image 7.8).

Finally, the Dunagiri expedition launched the Himalayan careers of two remarkable Australian climbers: Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall. From the large group of ANU students, Macartney-Snape and Hall stood out—first climbing high on the technically difficult Purbi Dunagiri and then overcoming the long and dangerous summit ridge of Dunagiri itself in a 49-hour display of daring and determination. Their Dunagiri success propelled them into a series of Himalayan climbs that led in just six years to one of the most spectacular ascents ever of Mt Everest. In doing so, they took the status of Australian climbing in the Himalaya from one of curiosity to one of high regard, as recognised by some of the most well-known and respected Himalayan mountaineers.

29 P. Cocker, Interview.

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.