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Everest apprentices

Mt Everest is an irresistible magnet to most mountaineers. It is certainly not because Everest is seldom climbed. Between 1953 and 1990, about 200 people have climbed the mountain, by at least eight different routes and in all three climbing seasons, and the number of ascensionists has risen sharply since 1990. Its magnetism also does not lie in its beauty. A hulking black pyramid set amid more shapely snow and ice-clad peaks, Everest is not one of the more aesthetic Himalayan peaks. Ama Dablam and Machapuchhare would have to take those honours and, amongst the 8000 m giants, K2 and Makalu are more beautiful. Everest is also not one of the most difficult 8000 m peaks; K2, Dhaulagiri and Makalu are all technically harder to climb. Simply because its summit is the highest point on the face of the Earth, however, Everest is a lure that few mountaineers can resist.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Everest had another strong attraction for Australian climbers: no Australian had ever stood on its summit, and, apart from George Ingle Finch in 1922, no Australian had ever attempted to climb the mountain. No doubt the thought of eventually climbing Everest crept into the back of the minds of a few young ANU students preparing for Dunagiri, and perhaps occasionally one young climber would say to his friend, 'If we go well on Dunagiri, maybe we'll have a go at Everest in a few years.'

For most of the ANU team, however, Dunagiri was a sobering experience. Although all members contributed to the eventual success, most found trying to climb a 7000 m mountain on a difficult route in their first Himalayan trip just a bit too hard physically and psychologically. Everest would be several times more difficult. Furthermore, for many, family ties and careers would prevent the commitment of time and resources needed to build a Himalayan climbing career to the stage where an ascent of Everest was a real possibility.

Still, Dunagiri was a first big step for Australians towards Everest. The ANU team was met on their return to Australia by Sir Edmund Hillary, who commented that 'Dunagiri is a formidable mountain and obviously they struck difficult conditions on their final ascent. I think they should be complimented.' He added that he thought the Dunagiri expedition 'was a step in the right direction for an Australian ascent of Mount Everest'.¹ Of the 15-member Dunagiri team, the two who were obviously in the best position to build on the successful ascent were Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall. Before even that formidable partnership could contemplate an assault on Everest, however, they would have to serve a much longer Himalayan apprenticeship and, along the way, find a few more like-minded Australian mountaineers to form a strong team for an Everest attempt.

After their trip to Dunagiri in 1978, Macartney-Snape and Hall began to spend more and more time in the Himalaya. There was a climbing trip to the Kulu Himal the next year and then frequent journeys to Nepal to lead treks for Australian adventure-travel companies. Although the treks involved no climbing, they still proved valuable experiences for the pair. They were able to learn more about the culture and customs of the Nepalese people, particularly the Sherpas; to become accustomed to the local food, which they would use to advantage on later expeditions; and to observe close up several of the mountains they would eventually climb.

It was climbing experience, however, that Macartney-Snape and Hall really needed to prepare for tackling bigger mountains. Their next opportunity came in 1981, when they were asked to join an expedition to 6856 m Ama Dablam, in the Everest region of Nepal. This time the trip was not their idea, but rather that of Ken McMahon, a Sydney rock climber who had made several trips to New Zealand and had done some hard climbing in the Southern Alps.

Like quite a few Himalayan trips, the 1981 Australian Ama Dablam expedition was started by climbers bailed up by bad weather in a New Zealand mountain hut. McMahon was climbing in the Mt Cook region in 1978 with American Dave Pluth when the pair decided that perhaps the weather was a little better, or at least a bit more predictable, in the Himalaya, so a climbing trip there would not be a bad idea. The idea gradually gained substance and Ama Dablam was chosen as the objective at the suggestion of Geoff Wyatt, who, in yet another contribution to Australian mountaineering, had learned that the mountain had just been released for climbing to foreign expeditions and passed that information to McMahon.

The team was organised in the best of traditions, as McMahon did a quick ring-around of his friends and acquaintances in the climbing community. American Hooman Aprin joined his countryman Pluth, Sydney climber Andy Henderson, resident in London at the time, was enlisted and Macartney-Snape and Hall, well

1 'Dunagiri—a step towards Mt Everest', *The Canberra Times*, 15 June 1978.

known from the high-profile Dunagiri expedition, completed the climbing team. Support was provided by Karen Robins, Leo Ertzler and Canberra climber Damien Jones, who contributed much to the rock climbing on the lower sections of the mountain.

With the climbing team scattered all over the world, the first major obstacle was to get them all together in Kathmandu at approximately the same time. This was no problem for Macartney-Snape and Hall, who were leading treks in Nepal just before the expedition, but for Aprin, the journey to Kathmandu proved nearly as dangerous as the climbing, as McMahon recounted:

Waylaid in a Bangkok hotel room by two girls, Girl-1 kept him occupied in the shower, while Girl-2 cleaned out his wallet and travellers cheques. Hooman, sensing something was amiss, came out of the shower to see Girl-2 running out the door. Disregarding his totally naked state, he chased her out into the street and jumped onto the bonnet of the getaway car. Holding onto the windscreen wipers, he tore off a wing mirror and proceeded to smash in the windscreen. The terrified Girl-2 rammed the front end of the car, then the back end, but got away in the crowd that had gathered.

Hooman stalked off to get his clothes. Girl-1 had disappeared, but in her haste had left her watch behind, so Hooman had an ‘expensive’ watch for his troubles. The Bangkok police were highly amused, and they all naturally assumed that Hooman was Clint Eastwood’s brother. I’m afraid Hooman suffered a lot of ribbing over this incident and the watch was eventually given to our sirdar.²

A few days later, in Kathmandu, Hall provided more amusement for the climbers, albeit in a less spectacular fashion. While shopping for food in a popular tourist area, he was accosted by a beggar who waved a misshapen hand in front of him and demanded a rupee. Hall responded by removing his shoe, exposing his feet with bits of toes missing and demanding two rupees. The beggar was stunned by this rejoinder and simply stared at Hall’s feet in silent amazement.

Wayatt’s suggestion of Ama Dablam turned out to be a stroke of genius. It was, in the words of Andy Henderson, ‘the perfect expedition for a small group—lovely walk-in, beautiful mountain, steep and interesting route’.³

As any trekker to the Mt Everest region will affirm, Ama Dablam is a stunningly beautiful mountain, one of the loveliest anywhere in the world. Seen from the Buddhist monastery at Thyangboche, Ama Dablam stands above the Imja Khola Valley as a giant spire of ice with two long, steep ridges spreading out like enormous arms to embrace the monastery. Sometimes called the ‘Terrible Tooth’, Ama Dablam in fact means ‘mother’s charmbox’ and is so named for the prominent ice cliffs

2 McMahon, K. 1981, ‘Captain Cruch. The Australian Ama Dablam expedition, 1981’, *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 34, pp. 63–7.

3 A. Henderson, Interview.

hanging like charms on the west face below the summit. With the black, rocky summit of Everest peering over the Nuptse-Lhotse wall in the background, the view up the Imja Khola towards Ama Dablam is one of the world's classic mountain scenes.

The Australian–American group had booked the North-East Ridge, which is behind the mountain when viewed from Thyangboche and accessed from a pleasant base camp on a grassy patch in the Chukkung Valley. There is no easy route to the top of Ama Dablam; like the other ridges, the North-East Ridge is unrelentingly steep and of considerable technical difficulty.

Illness and injury slowed the expedition at the start. McMahon contracted a chest infection and had to descend to Thyangboche for a week to recover. Meanwhile, Hall had run into problems as well, according to McMahon:

Lincoln's acclimatisation trick was to fall seven metres off a boulder into a bunch of smaller ones, and survive. He did need nine stitches in his leg, and we all held him down while Tim, our expedition 'doctor' (having spent time stitching up livestock on his parents' farm) gave him his injections and sewed him up.⁴

The steepness and difficulty of the ridge, combined with the fickle weather, slowed progress and forced the establishment of four camps on the mountain. The climb was roughly divided into thirds, with the first third being predominantly sound rock, which prompted one of the climbers to say that it was 'just like Booroomba [the ACT granite crag] at 5330 m'.⁵

Because the route was so steep and loads had to be carried to establish and supply the camps, fixed rope was placed on much of the ridge (see image 9.1). In addition, a ladder remaining from a French expedition aided the ascent of a 5 m overhanging section.

With the weather deteriorating as the season wore on, the second third of the climb became even more difficult. It was often mixed climbing on snow and ice of dubious firmness and on rock of not quite the same firm quality as that lower down. Progress was frustratingly slow, with a camp placed on a ledge at 6000 m and a further camp only 400 m higher.

At this point of the expedition, McMahon was forced to retire with a recurrence of his chest infection and Aprin and Pluth, concerned about the safety of the fixed ropes, also returned to base camp. That left Hall, Henderson and Macartney-Snape at the high camp to go for the summit. Although the top was only 550 m above them, it took several days to climb that last section of the ridge, as McMahon recalled:

⁴ McMahon, 'Captain Cruch'.

⁵ Ibid.

For two days they fixed ropes to the top of a large ice-tower that marked the end of the second third of the climb. On the 14th of May they left the camp and made an alpine-style bid for the top. After some nerve-racking and exhausting climbing they put in a snow-hole at 6,550 m where they spent the night. On the 15th of May they reached the summit, at midday (see image 9.2). Lincoln was responsible for the only incident of note—he dropped their chocolate bar down the south side of the mountain. That night, at 10:30 pm, they regained the high camp, a tremendous effort of endurance and commitment.⁶

Hall's recollection of the climb gave some clues about the nature of the 'nerve-racking and exhausting climbing' that McMahon referred to. Much of the upper section of the ridge was double-corniced—that is, overhung on both sides of the ridge—leading to dangerous and exceedingly tense climbing. Also, the snow on the ridge was soft and unconsolidated and at times the climbers had no choice but to put their weight onto ropes tied to aluminium stakes driven into the untrustworthy snow.

Hall, Henderson and Macartney-Snape's ascent of Ama Dablam was another big step for Australian mountaineering. Not only did it mark the second significant achievement for Hall and Macartney-Snape, it was the first Australian success on a mountain in Nepal since Peter Taylor's ascent of Langtang II in 1963. And, most importantly, it pushed Everest from the back of Hall and Macartney-Snape's minds to the front. That was not too surprising given the position of Ama Dablam's North-East Ridge: directly across the Chukkung Valley from the Nuptse-Lhotse wall and the summit pyramid of Everest. As Hall remarked, 'we were looking over at the bloody thing very often',⁷ so the idea of attempting Mt Everest moved from the realm of daydreams to that of constructive planning. Even at that point, Macartney-Snape had begun to think about doing a new route on Everest without artificial oxygen.

Also significant for the eventual Everest attempt was the inclusion in the Ama Dablam summit trio of Andy Henderson. Any realistic Australian attempt on Everest would require more than just two climbers, no matter how strong or competent, so the discovery of Henderson—an easygoing, compatible yet very competent mountaineer—added more strength and skill to the powerful nucleus of Macartney-Snape and Hall.

Henderson's development as a Himalayan climber followed a fairly typical Australian pattern. A Sydneysider, he became interested in outdoor sports through bushwalking at school and then became involved with rock climbing in the Blue Mountains. That eventually led to a trip to New Zealand in 1975, when he took an Alpine Guides instruction course and climbed in the Mt Cook region.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ L. Hall, Interview.

A year later, Henderson was back in New Zealand, this time climbing in the Mt Aspiring region with his friends Adrian Cooper and Martin Hendy. As often happens in New Zealand, bad weather forced the climbers into a hut for an extended period and their thoughts turned to climbing big mountains somewhere else, such as the Himalaya, where the weather might be better.

Independently, Sydney climber Gary Mathew had the same idea and he acted on it by booking 6864 m Changabang in the Indian Himalaya for the post-monsoon season (September–October) in 1977. Just next-door to Dunagiri, Changabang is a striking mountain dominated by two extraordinary rock faces that drop precipitously from just below the summit to the base of the Nanda Devi Sanctuary. Most mountaineers consider it, like Ama Dablam, to be one of the most charismatic peaks in the world.

Mathew quickly recruited Henderson and Hendy—already keen to go to the Himalaya—and added Malcolm Noble and Charlie Cuthbertson to complete the five-man team for the first of many Australian attempts on Changabang. At the time Mathew was planning the 1977 Changabang trip, very little Australian climbing had taken place in the Himalaya and, indeed, the Sydney climbers were unaware of the large ANUMC Dunagiri expedition—by then well advanced in planning and publicity—which would follow them to the Garhwal a few months later. Henderson, however, knew of Warwick Deacock's 1975 Mulkila expedition and of his trekking business, so obtained some advice from him. Most of their information specifically on Changabang, on the other hand, came from Colin Read, a British climber who had attempted the peak in 1976.

The 1977 Australian attempt on Changabang could be accurately described as very low key and run on an extremely low budget. Their equipment, of course, was limited by their pocketbooks. 'We were kitted out in our old New Zealand gear—ex-Army woollen trousers and the like,' Henderson said, 'and everyone lashed out for a good sleeping-bag and maybe one other item, perhaps a duvet, but that was all.'⁸

The shoestring quality of the trip continued on arriving in India, as Noble wrote:

[T]he merchant sits comfortably, surrounded by neat piles of grain and lentils of all description. He tips the last of the measures of freshly milled flour into one garbage bag and starts to total up the list of figures. Charlie flashes out his miniature calculator to check but the merchant, seeing this, utters a few words to his assistant and from the depths of the ancient store produces a calculator with at least twice as many functions. Amidst the laughter Charlie quietly pockets his and the merchant, with infinite patience, taps out the figures.

8 A. Henderson, Interview.

Our ridiculous pile of gear had forced Andrew, Charlie and me out of the tiny hotel room and into the corridor where we were trying to stuff an amazing array of biscuit tins with an even more amazing array of goodies. Struggling to remove the lid from a particularly stubborn tin, I fell backwards through the flimsy door of the next room accompanied by a resounding avalanche of tins and hardware. Seated in lotus position were two New Zealanders, up to that moment deep in meditation. Slowly one of them turned his head and glared at me with his eyes closed. Something told me that I wasn't the presence they were looking for and by the next day they had disappeared.⁹

The misadventures continued on the trek into the sanctuary:

Arrival at Base Camp was celebrated by Kunwar [the cook] exploding a pressure-cooker full of dahl all over the place and the paying of all but two of the porters. These two kindly agreed to be paid if and when we returned as we had run out of money. This factor, along with a sugar shortage and Charlie's habit of bludging fags from them, finally convinced the porters that we really were not millionaires.¹⁰

Changabang's imposing rock walls looked a bit too imposing to the five Australians, so they opted for a variant of Chris Bonington's 1974 original route of ascent: a rising traverse up the south face of Kalanka to a col in the ridge joining it to Changabang, then along the East Ridge to the summit. The route is still an exciting and challenging mountaineering proposition, but without the severe and sustained technical difficulty of the face routes.

The team, after a minimal period of acclimatisation, made a single, alpine-style push for the summit, partly because they did not have the equipment and supplies to set up a string of camps and partly because, as Henderson said, they 'didn't know any other style'. Despite none of them having had any previous Himalayan experience, they pushed through sometimes difficult climbing conditions to within 50 vertical metres of the summit before bad weather forced them back. Henderson added that they had simply 'run out of food, fuel, and energy'.¹¹

9 Noble, M. 1978, 'Changabang', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 31, pp. 54–8.

10 Ibid.

11 A. Henderson, Interview.

Changabang 1977

Malcolm Noble

Charlie arrived in good spirits from Base and dawn on the following morning saw the five of us plodding up the approach to the long gully. Well, you can read about high altitude plodding pains in any number of expedition books so suffice it to say that after this first day we were stuffed. For Gary and Charlie it was worse. Charlie was forced back, his ankle flaring into agony on the steeper ground, then Gary found that he wasn't acclimatising well and he, too, sadly moved down. After ages in the gully we soloed over some exposed mixed crud to emerge low on the Kalanka face. By dusk we had the tent perched on a miniature platform and I resigned myself to lying in a hammock formed by the tent floor over the edge of the platform. Andrew did wonders with the tuna and freeze-dry but this first night above 6000 m was awful so we gladly declared the next day a rest. Despite improvements the second night wasn't much better.

We treadmilled through deepening snow towards the col encountering only one nasty slot. This slot holds a special memory for me after I attempted to jump it during our descent and sped off down the slope in what I cannot claim to be an entirely controlled descent.

Camp 2 was thankfully level, sheltered by a small ice wall and commanding a superb view of the glacier with Nanda Devi dominating the whole show. In the evening we could look across to the light brown granite of Changabang's South face plunging startingly out of sight. Behind, the dark Earth shadows slowly drowned the mountains.

Breakfast of tea and biscuits took the usual one-and-a-half hours and the sun had hit the tent by the time we staggered out to claim our bits of frozen gear and struggled into harnesses. We rose onto the col from where we had the first good view of the East ridge. It looked quite a buzz but honestly the word narrow just didn't do it justice. Dunagiri showed up splendidly isolated against a backdrop of endless Tibetan ranges. Casting our gaze further we were moderately astounded to see foot-prints leading from the steep north side of the col and up the west ridge to the summit of Kalanka. Regrettably the tracks didn't belong to a Yeti but were those of a Czechoslovakian team that we'd missed by about ten days.

Andrew led onto our ridge, complaining about exposure as the loop in the rope dropped out of sight beneath us. Despite the effort, we raved in each other's ear at every belay about the fantastic position we were in. Time slipped by. At 3 p.m. while trying to negotiate an awkward gendarme we realised the summit wouldn't be reached before dark, so started digging a bivy [sic] cave. The usual afternoon cloud closed in, chilling us as we waited our turn to dig. By a stroke of foresight someone had brought a snow shovel but hard ice forced the tunnelling sideways until a diffuse light indicated the other side of the ridge coming up fast. So digging ceased and we grovelled into contorted positions, blocked up the entrance and discovered how dark it was inside.

I didn't bother asking Andrew [for a torch]—in a moment of chronic poverty he had sold his to a porter. Another strenuous rummaging session produced a 2-penlight, ½ candlepower device that cast a sick yellow glow for a few seconds then died. This was my torch. Dinner was a few banana chips and it was not a good night.

Morning, and we stumbled, blinking, out of our humble hole, forcibly realising what a home away from home it was. Ice runnels speared down, away, out of sight below. Looking up wasn't any better—high cloud, rising wind and spectacular forbidding cloud plumes off Kalanka and its mates. Breakfast—fudge and banana chips.

Leaving the sacks, the three of us moved off slower than ever, the summit cornice only just over there. We never made it. With a blizzard building up rapidly and each ropelength taking an age we simply had to get back along the ridge to the tent before dark. No disappointment, just mild relief, a strange pleasure in being where we were and the logic of having no real alternative.

The wind tried to buffet us out of our steps, gusting, driving showers of snow up the side of the ridge, over the cornices, filling the duvet hood with noise. We moved together slowly, balls of snow crusting our mitts, every little hair a line of white frost. The satisfaction of having been so high on a beautiful mountain with a small alpine party bloomed later.

From 'Changabang', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 31 (1978), pp. 54–8.

The 1977 Changabang expedition was, in many ways, a prototype for many Australian Himalayan expeditions of the 1980s. It was a trip organised by a group of friends and acquaintances with little fanfare and virtually no sponsorship. It attempted a significant mountain and it achieved as much or more than could have been expected from the climbers' previous experience. Not surprisingly, however, the Changabang expedition did not have the impact of the Dunagiri climb, which it preceded by six months.

At that time, there was no regular reporting of Australian climbing in the Himalaya, in either Australian outdoor magazines (*Wild*, for example, did not exist at the time) or overseas climbing magazines. Furthermore, the contact between groups of climbers in Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne and other centres was much less than it is now. Any publicity for an expedition in the 1970s had to be self-generated, which the Dunagiri team did to great effect and the Changabang team did not do at all. Or, as Lincoln Hall put it, 'The Changabang expedition was just as "major" as our Dunagiri climb, but they didn't beat their chests as much as we did.'¹²

The Changabang climb was particularly significant as the start of Andy Henderson's Himalayan career. Henderson's efforts on the Changabang and Ama Dablam expeditions obviously impressed Hall and Macartney-Snape, and at the conclusion of the latter trip they invited him to join them on a climbing trip to China later in 1981—an expedition they had organised before the Ama Dablam climb. Henderson accepted immediately.

The expedition, which left Australia just a few months after the conclusion of the Ama Dablam climb, was to the Anyemaqen Range in central China, to the north-east of the Himalayan chain. Although not part of the Himalaya, the main peaks, between 6000 and 6300 m high, provided Himalayan-like conditions in a remote and little visited mountainous region.

Hall, Henderson and Macartney-Snape were joined by Charlie Massy of the ANUMC Dunagiri expedition and by Geof Bartram, a very experienced Australian climber and mountain guide. Well-known British mountaineer Doug Scott was also to have been a member of the expedition but withdrew before the team's departure for China.

The trip was another success for Hall and Macartney-Snape, although the climbing was not as difficult as they had done on Dunagiri and Ama Dablam. In just a few days of real climbing, the pair, along with Henderson and Bartram, climbed a new route to the 6152 m eastern summit, from which Hall and Macartney-Snape traversed to the main summit—6282 m high. All four climbers then descended

12 L. Hall, Interview.

via the 6 km-long North Ridge. Massy had to leave the expedition early because of commitments in Australia and missed the climb to the summit. Three other smaller peaks in the range were also climbed during the course of the expedition.

Far more significant than the climbing were the contacts that the Australians made with the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA), which controlled all mountaineering activity in that country, including attempts on Himalayan peaks from the Tibetan side. Those talks with the CMA were the first chance for Hall and Macartney-Snape to sound out the prospects for an eventual Australian attempt on Mt Everest. What happened in the talks, as Henderson explained, surprised everyone:

In China you have to pay for everything at the end of the expedition. You just collect the bills as you go along and, at the end of the trip, CMA officials come along with an accountant and an abacus, a case of beer and some coke, and you sit down and work out how much you owe.

The CMA officials are mainly old climbers—with teeth, toes and bits of noses missing. So, though there were lots of arguments about how many yaks we really used and that sort of thing, there was also a lot of storytelling going on. In the midst of all this, Geof asked them what was available on Everest. ‘Nothing’ was the immediate reply.¹³

Macartney-Snape, however, had done some homework on the issue. While in Kathmandu after the Ama Dablam expedition, he obtained some information from a Japanese climber who had been on Everest’s North Face in 1980. The North Face appeared to be a good possibility, as it was a very direct route to the summit. At base camp on Amyemaqen, Macartney-Snape asked the liaison officer about the availability of the North Face and the liaison officer subsequently contacted Beijing for further information. The response from the CMA officials was that a French expedition had just cancelled their permit for the North Face/West Ridge in 1984, so Macartney-Snape and Hall grabbed the opportunity.

Suddenly an Australian attempt on Everest had become a reality. And more than that, there was relatively little time to prepare for it. In that sense, Hall and Macartney-Snape would have preferred an attempt in 1986 or 1987, but Everest was booked so far in advance (at that time, with very few exceptions, only one team was allowed on a particular route during a climbing season) that they jumped at the one chance they had, even if it meant that they would have less than three years to get everything ready. Furthermore, waiting a few more years increased the risk that another Australian expedition could have been mounted to Everest or that an American team would succeed on the North Face route that Macartney-Snape and Hall were contemplating for their expedition.

¹³ A. Henderson, Interview.

In addition to getting a booking for Everest, their Anyemaqen expedition had uncovered an enthusiastic third member of the Australian Everest team in Geof Bartram. If Andy Henderson's development as a Himalayan mountaineer followed a fairly typical Australian pattern, Geof Bartram's was more unusual. Born in Port Augusta, South Australia, he spent much of his youth in the Northern Territory; he went to high school in Darwin and then worked for five years in Alice Springs. At that time, there was virtually no rock climbing—and of course no alpine climbing—in the Northern Territory, so a career as a professional mountaineer would never have entered Bartram's mind.

After his stint in Alice Springs, Bartram travelled to the United States and was quickly attracted to the big snow-clad peaks of the Rocky Mountains. At the age of twenty-seven, he began his climbing career in the Rockies. He then travelled south to climb first the high volcanic mountains of Mexico and then peaks of the northern Andes in Bolivia and Peru. Unlike most other Australian mountaineers, he began alpine climbing immediately with no apprenticeship as a rock climber, and even later, despite a career as a professional mountaineer since 1978, he had done very little rock climbing.

Bartram's professional career began when he became a guide for the American Alpine Institute in Bellingham, Washington. For the next six years, until 1983, his life was almost totally devoted to mountaineering and he lived nearly all of that time on some of the biggest mountains in the world. He spent four to five months of every year guiding in the Andes of Bolivia and Peru and much of the remainder leading Himalayan treks for an Australian trekking company. After 1983, he devoted even more time—more than half of every year—to guiding in the mountains of South America. With scores of ascents of 6000 m peaks under his belt, Bartram was, by the early 1980s, Australia's most experienced high-altitude climber.

Geof Bartram brought much more than his considerable experience and skill to the Everest team. Despite the fact that climbing had become his work and that he spent most of his time in the mountains, he retained the enthusiasm and excitement for mountains of a keen beginner. He was not at all jaded by the professional aspects of his mountaineering adventures; in fact, he approached his trips like an experienced climber taking a group of younger friends into the mountains for a holiday. Bartram exudes that rarest of qualities: contentment with what he is doing with his life. Many of the things that drive people in our society—financial rewards, status, power, fashion and the like—are alien to Bartram. He is simply happy to spend his time climbing mountains. Such a mature, well-adjusted personality is a big asset on a long, difficult Himalayan expedition where danger is always present and tensions are often high.

Bartram's work as a guide endowed him with one other invaluable quality: judgment, or what many like to call 'mountain sense'. When taking paying clients up a high mountain—people who often have an intense desire to reach the summit but do not have the experience to match their ambitions—a guide must temper their enthusiasm and drive with his own ability to judge conditions as the climb progresses, conditions such as snow and ice stability, weather, his clients' strength and fitness and possible dangers such as rock falls or avalanches. Above all, the guide has to keep his clients alive and that often requires making more conservative decisions than a group of experienced climbers might make in a given set of circumstances. Such conservative decision making, which becomes second nature to an experienced guide, is particularly important for the Himalaya, where the enormous scale of the mountains and their potential dangers mean that decisions that would be prudent in New Zealand or the European Alps might not necessarily be so in the Himalaya.

So, at the end of 1981, where did the first Australian expedition to Mt Everest stand? The first big step, and sometimes the most difficult, had been taken. The mountain had been booked. Not only that, the Australians had the good fortune to land one of the last great routes on Mt Everest: the classic line directly up the North Face.

A second major obstacle—that of assembling a group of climbers with the skill and experience to have a reasonable chance of making the ascent—was well on its way to being overcome. The veteran guide Bartram had joined Hall and Macartney-Snape to form a trio of strong, experienced alpinists. With the possible addition of Henderson—who was definitely interested in, but not yet firmly committed to, the Everest trip—the group would be further bolstered. One or two more suitable climbers would complete a team of the ideal size to attempt a lightweight, alpine-style ascent of Everest's north wall.

One large gap in the group's preparation remained—that of experience on the very highest of the world's mountains, those 8000 m or higher. Bartram had plenty of experience on 6000 m Andean mountains, but his only attempt on a Himalayan peak ended very low on the mountain, just above base camp, with the tragedy on Annapurna III in 1980. Henderson had been on two Himalayan trips, Changabang and Ama Dablam, neither of which was even 7000 m high. And Hall and Macartney-Snape, the most experienced in Himalayan mountaineering, had climbed only one 7000 m peak with their last-minute push up Dunagiri in 1978. Everest, however, is nearly 2000 m higher than Dunagiri—an enormous difference by any standards. Conditions near Everest's summit would be far more difficult, dangerous and exhausting than anything they had ever experienced. They were fully aware that they needed considerably more high-altitude experience before tackling Everest. So, at the end of 1981, they found themselves with just two years not only to organise and finance the Everest expedition, but to climb mountains higher and harder than Dunagiri, Ama Dablam or Changabang—ideally at least one peak 8000 m high.

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