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Tough trials

The run-up to the 1984 Australian Everest expedition began modestly. Early in 1982, Tim Macartney-Snape, Lincoln Hall and Geof Bartram were back in the Himalaya, this time in the Garhwal region of India. This expedition, however, promised few of the tough conditions they would need to experience before attempting Everest. Their objective was Changabang, only 6864 m high, and they would be acting as guides for six clients from Australia and the United States. They would attempt the original route of ascent across the Kalanka Face and then along the East Ridge—the route that Andy Henderson and his Sydney mates had attempted in 1977. It would be a challenging and exciting climb for the novices, but hardly Everest-preparation material for Macartney-Snape, Hall and Bartram. They soon discovered, however, that well-laid plans could go very wrong in the Himalaya.

Access to their route on Changabang was via the inner Nanda Devi Sanctuary and the only feasible access to the sanctuary was the arduous trek up the gorge of the Rishi Ganga. In early 1982, heavy winter snows made a passage through the upper Rishi Gorge impossible until later than usual. Indeed, as Hall reported, ‘One Czech climber [Thomas Gross] was stranded by the heavy snow for a month inside the sanctuary. He survived by following the vultures around looking for something to eat.’¹ Gross eventually escaped by making an epic descent of the upper gorge in wintry conditions—a trip he described as harder than any climbing he had ever done.²

Fortunately, the Australians had not penetrated the upper gorge, but they were nevertheless forced to abandon their plans to attempt Changabang. They diverted instead to Trisul, a peak on the rim of the outer sanctuary that could be accessed

1 L. Hall, Interview.

2 T. Macartney-Snape, Correspondence.

without having to traverse the upper Rishi Gorge. At 7120 m, Trisul offered a bit more altitude than Changabang and a straightforward snow route to the summit would give appropriate climbing for a commercial expedition.

At first, things went much as planned, with a series of three camps—the highest at about 6500 m—putting the team in position for a summit attempt. As they occupied the top camp—a group of three tents—another of the season's intense snowstorms built up during the night and pinned the group to the side of the mountain for three days. Then followed a chain of events, triggered by the increasing intensity of the storm, which nearly led to disaster.

First, in an effort to get some sleep through the third night of the storm, some of the clients had taken large doses of sleeping tablets and were sufficiently drowsy to impair their ability to cope with the storm. While the three guides hung on to poles and reinforced their own tent, one of the other two tents disintegrated around some of the sleepy clients and tore to pieces. Just getting to the neighbouring tent was an ordeal for the novices as they were blown over repeatedly while crawling across the snowfield.

The situation soon deteriorated further. Despite the weight of six climbers in a three-person tent, the violent gusts of wind literally lifted the tent, forcing the climbers to dive for the back end to keep the tent on the ledge. That proved a futile exercise as that tent collapsed, leaving the beginners on the side of a big mountain in a storm in the middle of the night enveloped in a flapping, formless tent.

There was little the guides could do but provide shelter for as many as possible and try to prevent the onset of panic. Descent was out of the question with no light and an intense storm raging. With a slight drop in wind speed early in the morning, Macartney-Snape, Hall and Bartram ordered an immediate retreat.

The descent itself was fraught with danger, as the heavy snows had obliterated the tracks of ascent and had made the slopes avalanche prone. It was Macartney-Snape's uncanny knack to pick his way to safety through a storm—an ability for which he had become well known among his colleagues—that saw a disaster narrowly averted and the battered group safely down to camp two.

From there the team continued the descent to camp one, with the guides allowing one client to ski the easier terrain down to the camp on the condition that he came behind and stuck to their tracks. Bartram and Macartney-Snape set off with the rest of the group, leaving Hall to bring up the rear. On arrival at camp one, both Hall and the client on skis were missing. After an hour's search in the mist, Hall was located but not the skier; it was assumed that he had gone all the way to base camp.

There was no improvement in the weather the next day so the guides decided that the team should stay at camp one another night to allow the exhausted clients time to recover from the ordeal of the storm at camp three. On the rest day, Macartney-Snape set out for base camp to check on the missing skier, but only half an hour out of camp he turned back due to the threat of travelling alone in what he perceived to be dangerous avalanche conditions. Nearing camp, Macartney-Snape heard a faint cry and further yelling led him to the lost climber, who had dug himself into a hole in the snow. He had sustained some frostbite and seemed to be suffering from mild cerebral oedema, which could be fatal if the victim could not be lowered quickly. As he was incapable of walking well, he was helped down the mountain.

What had begun as a straightforward commercial expedition—one with, on the surface, little potential for rigorous Everest training—had turned out to be a surprisingly tough trial. Macartney-Snape, Hall and Bartram had been forced to deal with violent storms, altitude sickness and frostbite—conditions that often occurred on Everest. One ingredient, however, was still missing: extreme altitude. For that they would have to return to the little Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, which had the highest concentration of the range's 8000 m peaks.

Hall and Macartney-Snape had spent much time in Nepal leading treks for Australian adventure-travel companies in addition to participating in their own mountaineering ventures. The most popular of all the treks in Nepal, and one they had often led, was the circumnavigation of the great Annapurna massif.

In a land of spectacular mountains, Annapurna stands out as one of the most impressive of all. Set immediately to the north-west of the central Nepalese town of Pokhara—a decidedly tropical community just 850 m above sea level—the Annapurna Himal rises precipitously in a 20 km-long crest of icy peaks 7000 m high and higher. Nowhere else on Earth does such a massive line of mountains rise so abruptly from such a low base.

On just the first or second day out from Pokhara, even the most casual of trekkers cannot fail to be impressed by a beautiful black rock pyramid soaring above the eastern end of the Annapurna Range (see image 10.1). Experienced mountaineers are equally taken by a clean spur that drops directly from the mountain's summit down the South Face. It is one of the classic, direct lines that climbers so admire.

The mountain, Annapurna II, was thus well known to Hall and Macartney-Snape, who had often walked under it and looked up at that prominent spur on the South Face. As they thought more and more about preparing for Everest, Annapurna II looked a most attractive proposition. It was 7937 m high, nearly at the 8000 m mark and much higher than anything they had previously attempted. In addition to giving them the much-needed extreme altitude experience, it had seldom been climbed and none of the previous ascents had been by the striking South Face route.

They would get a good degree of hard, technical climbing and the challenge of the unknown thrown in with extreme altitude—just the right sort of preparation for attempting a new route on Everest.

Bartram was unavailable for the expedition, set for the second half of 1983, but Andy Henderson was available. By that time, Henderson had decided to go on the Everest expedition and was therefore keen to join Hall and Macartney-Snape for the warm-up on Annapurna II (see image 10.2). To that trio were added Mike Groom, one of the clients from the Trisul expedition the previous year, and Greg Mortimer, who, like Bartram, was a very experienced and highly competent Australian climber. Though experienced in the Andes, the European Alps and New Zealand, Mortimer had been on no previous Himalayan trips.

The Annapurna II expedition turned out to be quite an introduction to Himalayan climbing for Mortimer. In addition, it was a very tough Everest test indeed for the entire team—a trial by exceptional danger, even by Himalayan standards—and provided extreme discomfort from the very start of the trip.

For most expeditions, the walk in to base camp is an enjoyable and relaxing experience. Most Himalayan climbing trips begin with a ramble through the foothills, where the weather is mild and the colourful Nepalese village life makes the journey an interesting experience in its own right. Altitude is usually gained at a gradual, comfortable rate—just the sort of acclimatisation needed before the rigours of climbing. There are invariably spectacular views of the mountains as the climbers approach, creating an air of excitement and anticipation. Finally, the trek leads up to high, open valleys about 4500–5500 m in altitude, tucked under the high mountains, where a grassy meadow can often be found as an ideal site for a base camp. The trek usually takes a few weeks and provides an ideal transitional period from the rush of the last-minute organisational tasks to the isolated, monastic life in a high-altitude climbing camp.

The five Australians heading for Annapurna II, however, were denied virtually all these pleasantries of the standard approach march. Not only was their trek unusually short—about a week long—because of what Hall described as a place where ‘the geographical formality of foothills has been forgotten’,³ they had no choice but to follow a deep, jungle-choked gorge to the foot of Annapurna II. There simply was no gradual gain of altitude and no high, grassy alp from which to base their attempt on the mountain. Their base camp, established in a clearing at the end of the gorge, was at the ridiculously low altitude of 2600 m—not much higher than Mt Kosciuszko. That meant more than 5000 vertical metres of climbing to the summit.

3 Ibid.

The week-long march itself was generally unpleasant, with Hall making reference to ‘oppressive...muggy heat’, ‘sidestreams dangerously swollen by the monsoon rains’, ‘struggling through giant stinging nettles’ and ‘plucking dozens of leeches from our bodies’.⁴ Thrashing through dense jungle instead of strolling along mountain paths was bad enough, but having to do it during the heavy rains of the monsoon made the situation almost intolerable. As with the route, however, they had little choice as to the timing. The best weather for a post-monsoon attempt on a big Himalayan mountain is immediately after the rains clear and before the high winds and intense cold of winter set in, so the walk in has to be completed during the monsoon so that the team is in position to begin climbing just as soon as the weather stabilises.

For Hall, Macartney-Snape, Henderson, Mortimer and Groom, the climbing began during the monsoon, for the only way to progress beyond base camp was to struggle up through the steep jungle at the end of the gorge. It was not the start to an expedition that Macartney-Snape was accustomed to:

We had just climbed a 1,000 metre cliff overgrown with bamboo and a rich variety of other exotic herbage that grew in the black soil which clung in patches to the near-vertical mountainside. Being in the wettest region of Nepal during the monsoon means that it rains a lot, and the cliff face was the wettest place any of us had ever been. If it wasn't raining from the clouds, it was raining from the sodden vegetation, so we got used to being wet all the time.

It was a week since we had left Kathmandu and it seemed ludicrous that climbing had already begun. The previous day, we had arrived at a small clearing in the jungle and the porters had made it clear that it was indeed Base Camp. Base Camp? But we were still in low altitude moss forest, warm, humid and crawling with every imaginable insect. That night one of them crawled into my ear. It was probably minuscule, but it felt like an irate crocodile.⁵

One benefit at least of having a very low, uncomfortable base camp was that it encouraged the group to climb immediately out of the jungle at the end of the gorge and set up an advanced base camp much higher in the cirque at the head of the river—a camp much more practically located from which to stage the high-altitude climbing. With the help of a local porter, they promptly found a way up the vegetated cliffs and, in a series of stages, climbed out of the dense vegetation, up precipitous bluffs and across alpine herb fields to set up advanced base camp on a grassy meadow at 4700 m.

4 Hall, L. 1985, *White Limbo*, Weldons, Sydney, ch. 3.

5 Macartney-Snape, T. 1984, ‘Success on Annapurna II’, *Wild*, no. 12 (Autumn), pp. 38–41.

The climb to advanced base was not a trivial exercise, as Hall remarked that ‘carrying loads of food and equipment up to the depot was done in perpetual mist. It was almost a protective cloud, preventing us from seeing the extent that the cliffs rose above us and the doom that awaited us should we slip during the muddy climb’.⁶

It was a hard two weeks of work to establish and supply advanced base camp, but it was a great psychological boost for the climbers to be above the jungle and in a position to grapple with the more familiar problems of cold, high altitude and difficult rock and ice climbing. ‘We had been mentally preparing ourselves for this stage of the climb for months. It was a relief for us to face these familiar challenges and to leave the rain and mud and leeches behind,’ Hall said.⁷

During the load carrying up the head of the gorge, the climbers had a chance to glimpse some of the dangers that Annapurna II had in store for them higher on its flanks. Macartney-Snape recalled:

[W]e had tasted a sample of the awesome character of our surroundings, the most impressive being ‘the Generator’, a gigantic avalanche chute. What made it special was that several times a day thousands of tonnes of ice would fall down its 3,500 metres, with a cataclysmic roar. In one way or another, the mountain never let us forget how small and insignificant we were.⁸

‘The Generator’ was a fair warning for what was to come, as the climbers, particularly Hall, were about to experience dangers the likes of which they had never seen, and would never see again. Annapurna II certainly lived up to the reputation of the entire massif as one of the most dangerous places in the Himalaya. Statistically, Annapurna I is the most lethal of the world’s 8000 m peaks, and, as the Australian expedition to Annapurna III learned tragically in 1980, the other peaks in the range are not much safer.

Above advanced base camp, the route on Annapurna II led across a glacier and then up a 300 m-high rock cliff to a long, sloping shelf bedecked with another glacier, flowing parallel with the edge of the shelf. From there, the climbers could either cross the second glacier and ascend directly up a basin to a col below the prominent spur leading up the final rock pyramid or reach the col by a much more circuitous route along the long shelf and then up a small ridge on the adjacent glacier that connected the end of the shelf to the col. Mortimer and Henderson reconnoitred the former but found it too threatened by avalanche so the longer route, despite the extra effort it implied, was chosen.

6 Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 3.

7 Ibid.

8 Macartney-Snape, ‘Success on Annapurna II’.

With that decision made, the climbers, with help from Narayan Shresta and Lobsang Tenzing Sherpa, two of their Nepalese staff, began the tiring task of hauling loads up the long, glaciated shelf to camp one—a pair of snow caves in a hollow at the end of the shelf. As it would be an important staging post for the final assault on the summit pyramid, camp one was made as roomy and comfortable as possible and thus dubbed ‘Hotel Annapurna’. The carry to camp one was most demanding, however, as it entailed a gain of 1000 vertical metres in addition to the long climb up the diagonal shelf, which was steep in places.

Beyond camp one there were again two possible routes. One led up a sharp ridge and then dropped to the col, while the other dropped off the ridge and followed a glacier to the base of the col. Following the ridge itself was undoubtedly safer from avalanche threat, but the climbing was more difficult and it involved gaining unnecessary altitude that would have to be lost. The climbers therefore generally opted for the easier glacier route, if they judged the avalanche danger from the flanks of the ridge to be low; otherwise, they were forced onto the ridge route.

Just as camp one was well established and it looked like steady progress could be made higher on the mountain, Annapurna II again showed its deadly nature. The first attempt to reach the col was beaten back by bad weather, forcing the climbers down to Hotel Annapurna. Just before reaching the snow caves, they had to climb a 50 m rock cliff, which they had descended in the morning to gain the glacier. To expedite their return, they had left a rope in place on the cliff.

Hall was the last person up the rope, and as he began to climb, a rock fall showered down on him from the top of the cliff. He was very lucky to survive. Macartney-Snape described Hall’s appearance after the accident:

[H]e staggered into camp looking a frightening sight, with a bloody face and shoulders, his pack covered in rock debris and his helmet cracked like an eggshell. We helped him into our tent and took his gear off to look at the damage. Nothing obviously broken, but plenty of bruising, and he was in a state of shock.⁹

That close call was only the first of several. As Hall recuperated in Hotel Annapurna, the others pushed on to the col at 6600 m and set up camp two—a snow cave (see image 10.3). Over the next few days, they carried food and fuel to the cave to stock it in preparation for the summit attempt. They then decided to retreat to advanced base camp to rest for a few days before going all the way back up to the top.

On the way down, they stopped at Hotel Annapurna to pick up Hall, who had recovered enough to follow them down to advanced base. Just after they began the last leg of the retreat, Annapurna II unleashed another near-fatal assault and this time Macartney-Snape was the victim:

9 Ibid.

I got off the crest of the ridge below Hotel Annapurna. It had been snowing heavily and I was really worried about avalanches, particularly at a place 100 metres down the ridge where there was a steep icy base. Suddenly I felt very uneasy on the slope I was descending. The snow was getting deep and heavy. Then, with a heart-stopping, menacingly soft 'crump', the snow slope parted from the mountainside. It doesn't take long for a slab avalanche to start breaking up, and if you are standing in soft heavy snow that is vibrating, you soon become inextricably engulfed in it.

In the Annapurna firing line

Lincoln Hall

A few hundred metres below the Col the weather, which had been deteriorating all morning, became so bad that we were forced to dump our loads and head back to Hotel Annapurna. A short way before camp we were faced with climbing a fifty-metre cliff we had descended that morning to reach the glacier. We had left a rope in place, so it was a simple matter of climbing the rock with the rope for safety and as an aid. Only one person could climb the rope at a time. A blizzard was blowing when I, the last of us, began to scramble up the cliff. Because of the bad weather the others decided not to wait for me but to continue to the nearby camp.

A short way up the rock I put my weight on the rope. To my horror it immediately went slack. Before I had time to think I heard the rumble of rocks falling down the cliff. The rope had pulled loose some boulders. I flattened myself against the wall with my arms crossed over my head. Rocks showered around me, large pieces striking my right foot, my arms and my helmet with sickening force. When the dust subsided I checked that all parts of my body appeared as they should be. The pain from my arm and foot was already intense. I realised that I had to get back to camp before the shock wore off and the pain incapacitated me. Only determination got me to the top of the cliff. On the glacier again the wind and snow blew unobstructedly—with darkness approaching it was dangerous weather for an injured person to be away from camp alone. I hobbled back to Hotel Annapurna, already mentally accepting that the climb was over for me. At the snow cave the others were shocked by the sight of me—clothes and rucksack torn, my glasses broken and my face covered with blood. Luckily my injuries were not as serious as my appearance suggested. My helmet had been split, and it was that combined with my quick reactions which had saved my life. On my return to Australia an X-ray confirmed that a bone in my foot had been broken. For the rest of the climb my stiff mountaineering boot acted as a perfect splint.

[About 10 days later, after he had recovered sufficiently to take part in the climbing again, Hall and the others were forced by bad weather to retreat, this time to advanced base camp].

We continued down to the place we had climbed up and down earlier. To our horror we saw that the whole nature of the route had changed because the tremendous weight of the ice pushing the glacier down had pushed it sideways to the edge of the cliff. Huge blocks of ice teetered above our route ready to fall at the slightest nudge from the glacier behind. An ice avalanche had swept away the ropes we had left in place. Fortunately, by abseiling down the one rope we had with us, Tim was able to reach the tangle of ropes caught in the gully lower down. From there he made his way to the bottom of the cliff.

While we were waiting for Narayan to follow, a lump of ice the size of a television set bounced down the slope towards us. I was standing on the edge of the cliff and had nowhere to go. The block bounced straight towards me. I was able to jump over it, but caught a glancing blow to the thigh before it disappeared over the edge. We stared nervously at the blocks the size of trucks that were poised over us.

By the time I abseiled down to the others my thigh was so swollen and painful that I could not walk. My companions pushed, pulled and carried me down the glacier to Advance Base Camp where I spent a second week as an invalid.

From *White Limbo*, 1985, Weldons, Sydney, pp. 61–3. Re-published in May 2007 by Random House Australia.

This all flashed through my mind as I struggled to get off an unwanted ride. I was very aware of the 500 metre cliff looming up below me, but it was like trying to run in a dream. I don't really know how serious the situation was, but I managed to get off. To our great relief, the slope we had been worrying about had already avalanched.¹⁰

Later the same day, it was the luckless Hall's turn to again be in Annapurna II's firing line. When they reached the point on the shelf glacier where they crossed it and descended fixed ropes to advanced base, they were shocked to discover that the entire glacier had moved. According to Macartney-Snape, 'crevasses had opened up where there had been none, the ice had advanced laterally toward the edge of the cliff, and easy-angled slabs had been replaced by crumbling seracs'.¹¹

The most horrifying discovery, however, was that the ice had spilled over the edge of the shelf and ripped out the fixed ropes, which had been left as a tangled mass caught in a gully some distance below the top of the cliff. Working feverishly on the end of a climbing rope directly under the threatening seracs, Macartney-Snape was able to retrieve some of the rope and devise a makeshift line down the steep sections of the cliff. It was then the turn of the others to descend.

Narayan Shrestha, one of our two Nepali friends and high altitude Sherpas, was down next. As he was getting to the bottom, small blocks of ice whistled past, one piece glancing off his helmet. Before it had broken into smaller pieces, the same ice block had nearly knocked Lincoln from the cliff top. The sound of everyone scattering had made him look up to see a television-sized piece of ice bouncing straight at him. He jumped it and it glanced off his thigh. When it was his turn to descend, he could hardly move his leg. By the time we were all down the rock and had dragged, pushed and carried Lincoln across the lower glacier to Advance Base, it was well after dark.¹²

The mountain continued to torment them at advanced base. A snowstorm during the night overloaded the kitchen tent. It collapsed under the weight of the fresh snow and pulled a rock down on Tenzing, who was asleep at the time, gashing his scalp. The heavy snow also collapsed Mortimer's tent and soaked his sleeping-bag.

The bad weather continued, forcing a much longer stay at advanced base than the team had planned. It was at this stage of the expedition that the climbers could have decided that enough was enough and headed home with everyone still alive. After all, they had learned that Annapurna II was an extremely dangerous mountain, they were repeatedly frustrated by bouts of bad weather and Hall had been injured twice—and was lucky to have escaped death both times. To top it off, the enforced stay at advanced base had exhausted their food supplies. Facing those circumstances, many other expeditions would have called it a day.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

Macartney-Snape, Hall, Mortimer, Henderson and Groom, however, did not give in and showed instead a good deal of those old-fashioned qualities of persistence and patience—qualities that would serve them so well on their Everest attempt a year later. The first problem was food and everyone but Hall, who was recovering from his second round of injuries, made the 3000 m descent to the valley to obtain more food and then the long climb back up in only two days. This was an unusual psychological experience—to descend into the warm, thick air of the green lowlands during the middle of an expedition. As Macartney-Snape admitted, ‘the comforts in the land of the living almost tempted us to stay’.¹³

After their return to advanced base and with the clearing of the weather, patience was needed. Time had to be allowed for much of the new snow to avalanche off the mountain and leave their route safe, or at least as safe as any route could be on a treacherous mountain such as Annapurna II.

Finally, after Mortimer had done a difficult and rather dangerous day’s climbing to retrieve some of the rope mired at the bottom of the original route up the cliff, the team was ready to push back up again—this time determined to continue until they reached the summit. The deep, fresh snow made the trip up the shelf and then across the glacier to the col extremely exhausting work. It took the group three days to push beyond the col to the 7000 m level, at the base of the final rock pyramid. There they dug a snow cave—their highest camp—from which they could launch their final push to the top.

At this point, Narayan, Tenzing and Groom headed back down to leave Macartney-Snape, Hall, Mortimer and Henderson to make the summit attempt. It was a blow to Groom to have to descend since he had climbed extremely well in only his second Himalayan expedition, but it had been understood from the start that only two pairs would go for the top and, unless something happened to one of the more experienced climbers, Groom was the one to go down. Nevertheless, the Annapurna II expedition was a most valuable experience for Groom, who a few years later pulled off one of the most remarkable Australian Himalayan successes on an even bigger mountain.

From the snow cave, it was still nearly 1000 m to the summit and even the ever-optimistic Macartney-Snape realised they could not do that much climbing on steep and difficult terrain in a single day. They therefore set out with food, stoves and sleeping-bags in readiness for the inevitable bivvy.

13 Ibid.

The rock was friable with virtually no ledges, which meant it was difficult to climb and, with no suitable places to bivvy, the climbers, as much as possible, followed snow leads up the spur. Still, they made frustratingly little progress and at the end of the day with no ledge in sight, they decided to stash the food and extra climbing gear and retreat to the snow cave.

It turned out to be a wise decision, as they were hit almost immediately by a storm first of snow and then fierce winds that pinned them in the cave for five days. It was, as Henderson recalled, ‘undoubtedly the low point of the entire expedition. We couldn’t even get outside the cave to relieve ourselves.’¹⁴ In addition to causing extreme discomfort, the stormbound days in the snow cave did little for the climbers’ fitness. In fact, it began the process of slow deterioration that came with extended periods at very high altitudes.

When the storm finally abated, there was another opportunity for a quick retreat—an option that many other groups would have taken. Again, however, Macartney-Snape, Hall, Mortimer and Henderson doggedly set out for the top—this time in style: in the darkness and bitter cold of a predawn start.

They made steady progress up the spur, passing their previous high point by mid-morning. By the time they reached 7500 m, however, the pace slowed considerably. Hall remembered the difficulty of climbing at that altitude:

Every step which was in any way awkward required a few extra breaths for concentration. Every pull up was a real exertion. The way to cope with the enormity of the climb and the effort it demanded was to take each small problem as we reached it, and deal with that without worrying about all that lay above.¹⁵

Nightfall found them well short of the summit and they were forced to dig tiny ledges in the only patch of snow they could find. They tied themselves to pitons driven into cracks in the rock to prevent themselves from sliding off the ledges during the night (see image 10.4). To keep the threat of dehydration somewhat at bay, they cradled the purring gas stoves on their laps and melted snow far into the night.

The next day, they thought, would surely bring the summit and release from the struggle of steep, difficult climbing at lung-bursting altitudes. Just above the bivouac ledges, however, a 100 m-high gully of exceedingly steep, loose rock was the only route to easier-angled slopes below the summit. The climbing in the gully would have been difficult at sea level, but above 7500 m it was utterly exhausting. Only a last-ditch effort by Mortimer got a rope to the top of the gully, but they had used an entire day to climb just 100 m and were forced to retreat to the makeshift ledges for yet another night.

¹⁴ A. Henderson, Interview.

¹⁵ Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 3.

Again, the temptation to descend must have been strong. They were near the end of their strength, they had made extremely little progress, the summit seemed just as far away as ever and they had little food left. Furthermore, there was always the possibility that the weather, which had been uncharacteristically good for a few days, would break at any time. Even the usually indestructible Macartney-Snape was feeling the effect of their demoralising day in the steep gully:

All through the day I had had lapses of consciousness lasting half a minute or so and had to spend most of it huddled in a windy enclave halfway up the corner. The lapses of consciousness were probably due to an imbalance in my bloodstream caused by the strenuous activity of the day before, the altitude, and by not eating and drinking enough.¹⁶

Somehow, after another extremely uncomfortable night on the tiny ledges, the foursome dredged up enough energy to climb back up the rope to the top of the steep gully and then struggle on up the relatively easier terrain above. At 2pm, they stood just below the summit cornice, having completed a remarkable first ascent typified by an almost superhuman determination to overcome any obstacles the mountain could throw in their way. There was no time to relax and congratulate one another, however, as they still faced a long, steep descent to get off the summit pyramid.

Just as it had done earlier in the expedition, Annapurna II struck them on the descent with a sudden ferocity. As they were nearing the top cave, the climbers were engulfed in a violent electrical storm. 'We were within clouds that began discharging. There was enormous energy all around us,' Henderson said. 'My glasses were arcing from frame to frame, and there were flashes of lightning on our ice axes.'¹⁷

The horror descent continued below the snow cave. More wind and snow buffeted them as they climbed down from the col to the shelf. With little food and fuel left, they were weakening rapidly. Avalanches were tumbling around them with alarming frequency and the shelf glacier had again changed beyond recognition. When they finally reached advanced base, they found it deserted; the local staff had retreated to the valley floor. Finally, the four summiters descended the last 3000 m to the valley floor—much to the relief of Narayan, Tenzing, Groom and the others, who had become extremely anxious about their safety given the long time it took to climb the mountain. Their safe descent was also a relief to friends and relatives in Australia, as an earlier report had reached Australia that Macartney-Snape, Hall, Mortimer and Henderson had been given up for lost and were presumably dead.

¹⁶ Macartney-Snape, 'Success on Annapurna II'.

¹⁷ A. Henderson, Interview.

Escape from Annapurna

Tim Macartney-Snape

Clouds mushroomed around us. Familiar with the mountain's capability for producing surprises, we were now very anxious to get down. We finished the final abseil as darkness fell, and the first signs of electricity became obvious just before we got back to the snow cave. There were metallic tastes and odours in the air, a buzzing and crackling about our equipment and bodies, and the blinding flash of very close lightning. With the weak rays of a headlight, we found the snow cave and bundled in. The thin walls did nothing to lessen the blinding flashes.

We used our second last fuel canister to boil the billy dry. At 1 am thirst woke us, and we all wondered what had happened to the first brew! The next day we stumbled down to the col. We were back to luxury again. The wind shook the tent and spindrift hammered the walls, but they were kept out, and only the sun's warmth came in. As we lay in a disordered heap, our world seemed briefly benign. That night heavy clouds engulfed us and a blizzard began. It was snowing heavily as we left the col next morning. Snow lay menacingly deep on the mountainside. Conditions were exactly wrong to be descending in, but we had no choice: food and fuel were very low and our bodies were weakening. Our fatigue was astonishing; our disinclination to move was almost overwhelming, and all day our nerves were under constant strain. Spindrift avalanches hissed around us, and every few exhausting steps the snow slope settled with that heart-stopping 'thump'. That was the worst day any of us had spent in the mountains. Until the following day...

It continued to snow overnight, and after digging Andy out from the snow cave (we had slept in the tent), we discovered how it was possible to take an hour of hard work to move across 100 metres of level snow. The glacier above the rock barrier had now changed beyond recognition. It was composed of crumbling seracs capped with a metre-and-a-half of soft snow and it overhung the rock barrier. Our progress was ridiculously slow. Hunger, thirst and exhaustion were starting to cramp our style. We spent a wet night above the barrier. In the morning I waded across the top of the serac we were camped on to see what it was like at Advance Base. I peered over the edge and couldn't believe it, I didn't want to believe it—Advance Base was a clean unbroken fold of untrodden snow on the mountainside, no tents, no people, and maybe no food! As we discovered later, the porters had come on time and our Sherpas had decided not to waste money, so everything had been taken down to the nearest village. Maila Tamang, our exceptional cook, had waited for us, together with a local porter, but when it snowed almost a metre, the porter became so frightened that Maila was forced to take him down. However, he did leave the cake he had baked especially for our return.

It is hard to describe the feeling when, after spending days on end during which your survival is questionable, you suddenly know you have got through and are going to survive. The world is suddenly more beautiful than ever. It took us a whole day to reach Advance Base—in better days it had taken just over an hour. Despite still having a gruelling 3,000 metre descent to get off the mountain properly, we knew we had made it, and euphoria, clouded by exhaustion, overcame us. We thought of the conversation we had had back in Kathmandu, while we were staying in the house of our friend, Kunga Sherpa, Greg had described how traumatic it had been to turn 30 and Andy had replied, 'What do you mean, I will be extremely glad to turn 30.' We youngsters looked hard at each other and nodded in agreement.

From *Wild*, no. 12 (Autumn 1984), p. 41.

In addition to being quite a significant climb in its own right, the ascent of Annapurna II was the perfect trial for Everest. It was much higher than any mountain any of the climbers had previously attempted (in fact, it was the only mountain higher than Dunagiri, ascended by the ANU team in 1978, that an Australian expedition had climbed at that time) and it offered challenging climbing at the highest altitudes. The level of danger and discomfort was very high, even by Himalayan standards, which gave the Australians just the sort of gruelling mental experience they needed before tangling with Everest. Perhaps most importantly, it gave Greg Mortimer,

the fifth member of the Everest team, a chance to climb in Himalayan conditions with Macartney-Snape, Hall and Henderson. As noted earlier, it was Mortimer's first Himalayan expedition at all, for although he was asked to join in the 1981 expedition to Anyemaqen, he was unable to participate due to other commitments.

Mortimer's addition to the Everest team added the final touch of experience, ability and compatibility that strengthened the group sufficiently to have a realistic chance of climbing the mountain. Although he was completely unknown in Himalayan climbing circles, and indeed not all that well known among Australian climbers, Mortimer, like Bartram, had quietly become one of the country's best mountaineers—in fact, a very good climber by any standards.

The Boy Scouts was Sydneysider Mortimer's introduction to the bush. By the time he was seventeen, he had become an avid Blue Mountains rock climber and, like many of his climbing friends, he heard casually from others about climbing the snow and ice peaks of New Zealand. From those tales and stories told around the cliffs and campfires of the Blue Mountains, Mortimer developed a curiosity about mountaineering and soon made his way to New Zealand.

Although he wisely concentrated on easy ascents and pass crossings on his first trip, Mortimer became hooked on climbing big mountains and went back to the Southern Alps repeatedly in subsequent years. His big breakthrough in climbing came with a two-year burst of activity in Europe and North America. He climbed almost continuously in the big alpine mountains around Chamonix and in the rugged Dolomites of Italy; he tackled some of the hardest rock climbs England and Scotland had to offer; and he climbed in the mecca of big-wall climbing: the Yosemite Valley of California.

Mortimer also had a flare for the less-frequented and more unusual climbing venues around the world. He travelled to Africa and climbed the Diamond Couloir, a spectacular ice route high on Mt Kenya, and he made the first traverse of Balls Pyramid, an isolated spike of rock jutting out of the Pacific Ocean east of Australia. Antarctica, too, held a fascination for Mortimer, who first made a visit to the continent shortly after joining the New Zealand Antarctic Division as a geologist in 1979.

Before the Annapurna II expedition, the highest peaks that Mortimer had climbed were in the Peruvian Andes of South America. During a three-month trip in 1980, he and his partners climbed a variety of peaks of varying difficulties from 5700–6600 m high. The highlights were undoubtedly a technically hard ascent of the South Face of Piramide (5885 m) and the climb of 6637 m Yerupaja, a spectacular mountain in the Cordillera Huayuash. Mortimer described the latter as

a magical journey with all the elements of a ‘real expedition’—the uncomfortable truck ride, haggling with the mule owner, the walk through deep, dry valleys with little mud villages—setting up a camp—reconnoitring a route on the face—up to 6,400 metres and bivy [sic] on the saddle—up to the summit and quickly back down. We ran out of snow stakes rapping [abseiling] back down, so had to saw the last four in half with a Swiss army knife.¹⁸

It was on one of Mortimer’s much earlier trips to New Zealand, in 1974, that he met Hall and established the connection that later would lead to his inclusion on the Everest team. That was Hall’s first trip to New Zealand and he recalled climbing with Mortimer: ‘Following him up mountains had left me impressed and scared, and determined to restrict myself to the safe warm granite of my home cliffs.’¹⁹ Of course, Hall did not restrict himself to rock climbing in subsequent years and Mortimer also continued to broaden his climbing skills and experience. Describing the 1984 Australian Everest team, their colleague Geof Bartram, himself a professional mountain guide, remarked, ‘Amongst Australian climbers, Greg Mortimer stands apart. He is very, very good technically.’²⁰

Just as important as climbing ability to the success of a Himalayan expedition—as has been shown time and time again—is the compatibility of the team members. In this aspect, Mortimer excelled too. Softly spoken and gentle in nature, he was never one to aggressively put forward his point of view or to provoke a confrontation. Hall put it very well:

In every other sphere of mountaineering [outside Himalayan climbing] he was more experienced than any of us. Despite that, in discussions of tactics away from the mountain, he offered his opinions only when invited, as if he were storing his ability to make instant decisions during the climb... The gentleness of his everyday manner was balanced by the aggressive determination of his climbing. This aggression was directed at himself, allowing no space for fear or hesitation to interfere with his judgement. That approach made him a very strong mountaineer indeed.²¹

Mortimer was linked with three other strong mountaineers on the impressive ascent of Annapurna II. That climb showed that the Australian team to attempt Everest would be a formidable one, a group that could overcome all sorts of adversity to persist until they put someone on the summit. The Annapurna II team was, however, only four-fifths of the Australian Everest team; Geof Bartram was absent. Bartram had planned an Everest trial of his own a few months later, leading a guided ascent of 7145 m Pumori in the Everest region of Nepal.

18 *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 36 (1983), p. 60.

19 Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 2.

20 G. Bartram, Interview.

21 Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 2.

Like Annapurna II, Pumori is an eye-catching peak along a popular trekking route. A beautifully symmetrical obelisk of ice rising as a sentinel guarding the Khumbu Icefall and Western Cwm of Mt Everest, Pumori stands at the end of the normal trekking route to the Everest region. In fact, Kala Pattar, the hillock most trekkers climb for the classic views of Everest, is a small outlier on the South Ridge of Pumori. This makes access to Pumori, unlike that to Annapurna II, quite easy—ideal for a guided party such as the one that Bartram was leading in early 1984.

Although Pumori was not as high as Annapurna II, it was still a good test for Bartram, as he had to safely guide six clients up a 7000 m peak. As he knew from his experience on Trisul two years earlier, taking inexperienced mountaineers up a high Himalayan peak was a very serious business. This time, the trip went smoothly and Bartram not only got all six of his clients to the summit, they climbed the mountain by a new route on the South-East Face. As a bonus, the group was treated to continuous views right up the Western Cwm of Everest as they climbed to the summit of Pumori. So, Bartram too was coming off an impressive success just before the Everest expedition.

It was just six short years since the ANUMC's trip to Dunagiri—a milestone in the development of Australian Himalayan mountaineering. Now, sooner than anyone had dared imagine, and sooner even than the climbers themselves had wanted, an Australian team was on the verge of departing for Everest. It was a strong and talented team with a string of successes—Annapurna II being particularly impressive—in the lead-up to Everest. The group, however, had a total of only nine Himalayan expeditions under their collective belts and no ascents or attempts on any of the 14 peaks of 8000 m—yet they were about to embark on one of mountaineering's biggest challenges: an attempt, without the aid of artificial oxygen, to climb a new route on the world's highest peak.

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