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Patience and persistence

January 1984 came all too soon and there was still a mountain of work for the members of the first Australian Everest expedition to get through before they even left for China. The team of five was set—Lincoln Hall, Tim Macartney-Snape, Andy Henderson, Greg Mortimer and Geof Bartram—but Bartram was busy organising his commercial climb of Pumori and Mortimer had work and family commitments that kept him in New Zealand, so only Hall, Macartney-Snape and Henderson were left to tackle the Everest tasks. Much gear still had to be obtained and shipped to China, high-altitude food had to be purchased and packed and sponsorship and financial support still needed to be obtained.

Financial support, in particular, proved hard to find. Even though this would be the first Australian expedition to attempt Mt Everest—the most well-known and prestigious objective in Himalayan mountaineering—the sport of mountaineering was so little known in Australia that even an Everest expedition attracted little interest or financial support. The team did get some in-kind support from equipment manufacturers, but it was really money that they desperately needed.

Climbing the northern flanks of the Himalaya from Tibet is strictly controlled by the Chinese Mountaineering Association (CMA) and the all-inclusive, in-country organisation, transport and accommodation services the CMA provides are not cheap. Furthermore, unlike the situation in Nepal, where a variety of trekking/expedition companies compete for clients and there is much more scope for climbers to arrange their own in-country accommodation and transport, there is no alternative to the CMA in China. By the time the team returned from the Annapurna II climb, they had raised less than one-third of the money they needed for the Everest climb, much of it the fees required by the CMA.

Just when it looked like the whole expedition could be in serious financial difficulty, Sydney's Channel Nine television station came to the rescue (see image 11.1). It decided to bankroll the rest of the expedition's expenses in exchange for exclusive film rights to the climb. Although the Channel Nine support was most welcome to solve the expedition's financial crisis, it raised that old Himalayan mountaineering conflict of interest: the need of the climbers to exercise sound, conservative judgment on the mountain and the requirement of the media representative(s) for a good story or film. It was a situation that had created some tension on the 1978 Dunagiri expedition by the ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC).

The potential conflicts that could have arisen in the Channel Nine–Everest arrangement were mostly avoided at the very outset by the choice of an excellent film crew, many of whom had mountaineering experience themselves and all of whom had previous experience working and living in harsh conditions for extended periods.

Mike Dillon was the obvious choice for producer and cameraman. With 11 Himalayan films under his belt, including four with Sir Edmund Hillary, there was no-one else in Australia more experienced in adventure film-making. He was assisted by Colin Monteath, the veteran New Zealand mountaineer who was the climbing leader of the 1980 Australian Annapurna III expedition, and Howard Whelan, an American expatriate with extensive experience in skiing, climbing, photography and writing. Whelan later became the editor of Dick Smith's *Australian Geographic* journal.

Serving a dual role as soundman and expedition doctor was Jim Duff, an Englishman with a broad mountain background that included climbing in Britain, Norway, the European Alps, North America, New Zealand and Australia. In addition, he had taken part in expeditions to Changabang and K2, the world's second-highest mountain, and was the doctor on the British ascent of the South-West Face of Everest in 1975. As will be described later, Duff also played another part in the Australian Himalayan story.

Simon Balderstone, who joined the expedition as a reporter for Melbourne's *Age* newspaper, completed the auxiliary group. Balderstone had earlier covered environmental and political issues for the *Age* and also had a strong sporting, bushwalking and trekking background. He quickly developed good rapport with the climbers—a relationship that served as an excellent model for how mountaineers and media people could work together.

The approach to Mt Everest from the north is quite unlike its counterpart in Nepal from the south. The Nepalese approach is invariably on foot and usually takes a minimum of two weeks and sometimes longer if the trek is begun at Jiri rather than Lukla. It is a time for getting the body used to higher altitudes gradually

and to carrying heavy loads, and for making the psychological adjustment from urban Western life to an expedition existence. In China, there is no such gradual adjustment. Transport is by every means other than foot and climbers are treated more like well-looked-after tourists than footloose trekkers.

The Australian Everest team left Sydney for Hong Kong on 16 July 1984 and arrived in Beijing four days later. There they were met by officials from the CMA, who not only helped iron out last-minute logistical snags for the expedition, but acted as tour guides, interpreters and transport and accommodation agents. The Australians were shown the Temple of Heaven, Mao's Tomb, a Chinese circus performance and, of course, the Great Wall.

After a couple of days of sightseeing in Beijing, the group travelled to the southern Chinese city of Chengdu, where they spent another day as tourists before taking the flight to Lhasa. Although playing the tourist game in China was pleasant enough, it did very little to prepare the climbers either mentally or physically for the challenge of Everest. As Hall said, 'As we travelled through China there was a real sense of biding our time, of twiddling our thumbs until the action started.'¹

On 25 July, nine days after they had left Sydney, the team was in the fabled Tibetan capital of Lhasa, presided over by the spectacular Potala Palace. Lhasa lay at an elevation of 3500 m—high enough to cause altitude sickness for some who flew there directly from low-lying cities, so several days were allowed for acclimatisation before continuing the trip to Everest.

Lhasa also means the end of relatively comfortable transport. From there, progress towards the Himalaya is overland by bus or truck and, as Hall notes, 'the roads in Tibet are amongst the worst in the world—an endless succession of pot-holes, fords, washouts, rockfalls and sand-dunes'.² Beyond Lhasa, the road towards Everest rises gradually, crossing a series of passes that link high basins. It seems that the pass crossings are just as tortuous for Tibetan vehicles as they are for humans on foot. Forced to walk over one such pass with the rest of his colleagues while the lightened bus struggled to get over on its own, Hall remarked that the break from bus travel provided the opportunity 'to realign our heads and shoulders after the hours of continuous shaking'.³

The route towards Everest had considerable interest and excitement to match the discomfort. Near the end of the first day out from Lhasa, the group's bus was stopped at the flooded Tsangpo River, where the vehicle ferry had not been able to operate

1 Hall, L. 1985, *White Limbo*, Weldons, Sydney, ch. 5.

2 *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

3 *Ibid.*

for days. They had no alternative but to trust themselves and all the expedition gear to the flimsy-looking yak-skin coracles, the only craft able to negotiate the river. A couple of crossings and the Australian expedition was again safely on its way.

After passing through the towns of Zigatse and Zegar—the latter with the ruins of a fairytale fortress snaking up a long ridge far above the town—the expedition members had their first view of Mt Everest from the north. For Greg Mortimer, it was his first view ever of the world's highest mountain. 'When we crested the pass we were amazed to see, forty kilometres away, the Himalaya stretched out before us,' Hall recorded:

Cho Oyu, Gyachung Kang, Makalu and, in the middle of them all, Qomolangma—Mt Everest. We stopped the truck and jumped out. The monsoon clouds soon closed in, but not before we were given enough time to appreciate the scale of our objective. The giant mountains of Makalu and Cho Oyu seemed dwarfed. Of all of us, only Greg had not seen Mt Everest before, and he was now adjusting his expectations to the unimaginable reality.⁴

Below the pass lay the entrance to the Rongbuk Valley, which drained the northern aspects of Mt Everest. The Rongbuk was, according to Hall,

appropriately magnificent, gradually narrowing until it was almost a gorge. A thousand metres above us on both sides rose gigantic cliffs. The skyline was a jagged ridge of pinnacles and turrets balanced against the call of gravity—perhaps an example of the power of Mt Everest looming huge somewhere hidden in the clouds at the head of the valley.⁵

Hall's description of the Rongbuk Valley is typical of the many powerful passages in the book *White Limbo*, his account of the expedition. He achieves a rare combination of colourful and evocative description of the physical scenes around him, riveting accounts of events on the mountain and poignant glimpses of his own thoughts and feelings during his personal struggle with Everest. The three themes are woven effortlessly together. *White Limbo* is truly a classic of modern mountaineering literature.

Hall and team were, however, still some way from coming to grips with Everest. The entrance to the Rongbuk Valley was a considerable distance from their goal. The expedition's truck crept through the gorge and finally rattled to a stop at a grassy river flat where the defile opened slightly. That was as far as the vehicle could go and so it was, by definition, Everest base camp. It was far too far away from the base of the mountain to be of any use as a climbing camp; in fact, the

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

base of Everest's North Face was still some 20 km away. Still, base camp was at an altitude of 5100 m and a few days there sorting and packing gear proved to be useful acclimatisation time.

Although the Australian climbers missed out on the experience of approaching base camp on foot over several weeks, they somewhat made up for it by spending the next few weeks carrying gear and food up the Rongbuk Glacier, first to advanced base camp, about 10 km further up the valley, and then to camp one, set at 5750 m at the base of Changtse, a northern outlier of Mt Everest. Camp one was still a couple of kilometres from the base of the North Face; anywhere closer would have put the camp in the danger zone for the mammoth avalanches that periodically poured down the face.

The time spent doing all the logistical legwork up the Rongbuk Glacier was certainly not wasted. The climbers were gradually becoming fitter and more acclimatised to working extremely hard at high altitudes. Carrying 30–40 kg loads over difficult terrain above 5000 m was exhausting work, but the drudgery was somewhat eased by the immensity of the landscapes they were walking through: the bizarre fin-like formations of the ice on the Rongbuk Glacier, the barren canyon walls near base camp and the magnificent ice peaks that anywhere else in the world would be an impressive range in their own right but in Tibet were just outliers of Everest. Andy Henderson added interest to his spell of load carrying by contriving to have a minor epic on a trip to advanced base camp. His description of the day gives a most realistic account of crossing glacial streams and climbing crumbling moraine walls—the stuff of many a Himalayan expedition.

During the days of load carrying, the team was not losing any valuable climbing time, as to really start climbing on the face would have been suicidal at that time. Monsoonal storms were still dumping snow on the mountain, which it subsequently shed in often spectacular fashion. In one such incident, a huge slab avalanche broke away from a fracture line several kilometres long and slid down the face from 7500 m to the bottom. The powder snow blown out in front of the avalanche dusted camp one, a couple of kilometres away. That and other such avalanches convinced the team that it would be prudent to work on stocking the glacier camps until the monsoon exhausted itself.

Meanwhile, the large American expedition—the one that had originally wanted the Australians' North Face route and still planned to climb it once the Australians had failed and gone home—was already pushing up the safer North Ridge route. Macartney-Snape visited their base camp, as several of their climbers had attempted the North Face two years earlier: 'Jim Wickwire, one of their leading climbers, was

extremely forthcoming with the considerable knowledge he possessed, and was sufficiently impressed to describe our projected route as a Yugoslav or Czech route. In Himalayan terms that is quite a compliment.⁶

By the mid-1980s, Eastern European climbers, particularly the Yugoslavs, Czechs and Poles, had become well known for their difficult and dangerous ascents of steep face routes; they were the 'hardest' of the hard men who climbed in the Himalaya.

A day on the Rongbuk

Andy Henderson

Carefully I pulled the 'phones out of my ears, and fumbled numbly with my Walkperson to kill the music which had been filling my head for the past forty minutes. As the chord abruptly cut and the earplugs came out, the subdued sound of the stream in front of me swelled to an intimidating roar.

Upstream, to my left, the water thrashed over a tumble of boulders obscuring any further view from the crossing. The bed of the stream was hinted at by the increasingly steep slopes of mud and rock that flowed up through the layers of cloud, eventually forming the improbable palisades of the East Rongbuk valley, with their shattered rock and hanging gardens of ice.

In front and down stream, the water's behaviour was initially more restrained as it flowed through a series of turbulent pools, before the bed once again dropped steeply, til it was absorbed in the fantastic terrain of the Central Rongbuk. As often happens, the mountain gods had dotted these pools with boulders to ease the passage of travellers, but now the boulders were nearly invisible as soft, grey flakes of snow, untouched by wind, slowly blanketed the smooth rock.

I sighed inwardly, as I recognised all the hallmarks of a developing epic. This little effort, I realised wearily, would confirm my position as expedition bimbo, a role I had been trying to avoid ever since I had managed to con my way onto the trip.

Earlier in the evening I had left Base Camp at the road head after saying farewell to Baldo [Simon Balderston] and our Chinese staff, and headed up to Advance Base Camp with a pack load of food, hoping to reach it without too much drama in about two hours. Actually there was not much really worth calling food at BC, as Baldo had been at some pains to point out, and my pack was, in fact, full of vitamin pills and other dietary supplements. These were all well and good if teamed up with a healthful muesli slice, but were pretty inedible on their own. Baldo, a vegetarian like most of the team, I had left to carry on his lonely struggle with the Chinese, their toilet habits, and telecommunications system, whilst subsisting on a diet of Vitawheats and packet soup. I felt sure his experience as a political reporter, and his proven ability to survive in the surreal atmosphere of the Canberra press gallery, would stand him in good stead.

I decided the normal crossing point was too dodgy, the gazelle-like leaps needed to move from rock to rock being sabotaged by the sludge rapidly accumulating on them. Any unplanned swim at this stage would have been more than embarrassing, so I moved a short way downstream and began to strip below the waist. Whimpering pathetically and wielding a formidable pair of ski-stocks, I shuffled slowly into the water, feeling a brief flash of pain in the groin, and then a welcome numbness. Flailing desperately with the stocks I fought to remain upright, and finally struggled across the 10 m to the other bank. It was almost completely dark now, and I was committed to either finding ABC or spending a night out, as recrossing the stream was too risky to make it a going proposition.

At first the falling snow served to outline the path worn by the yaks, making it stand out clearly in the light of my headtorch, but soon the continuing snow obliterated all trace of the track, and I realised with a sinking heart that I would have to rely on instinct in following the trail. As I possess none worth mentioning I felt I had reasonable cause for worry. At this rate I knew I could end up in Nepal if I wasn't careful, but my choices were few, and I ploughed on.

6 Macartney-Snape, T. 1985, 'Mt Everest, the Australian ascent', *Wild*, no. 15 (Summer), pp. 26–32.

Somewhere, I had to 'turn left' and climb away from the glacier, up onto the lateral moraine where ABC was located. Since I had little chance of finding the actual route, any way up was, within certain limits, as good as any other, so guessing at a likely spot I headed off, up the moraine.

Within minutes I found myself on a steep slope, loose underfoot, and mushy with snow. Boulders, dislodged by my clumsy feet, rattled down the slope. A period of protracted silliness followed as I ploughed up through the mud and rubble. I continued to entertain a series of guesses as to my location, but none of the options were very pleasant, so I was forced to continue bumbling on, maintaining a steady flow of foul language the whole while. My watch had been broken playing frisbee back in Peking and so I have no idea how long this farce continued, but eventually, to my great surprise and considerable gratification, the slope layed back. Lo! to my complete astonishment a small cairn swam into the light. Stunned by my good luck I plunged smugly forward. Immediately my headtorch, demonstrating a perversity rarely seen in day-to-day life, died, enveloping me in a rich darkness. I stopped moving instantly, fearful of injury, and felt my way to a rocky seat. The silence was wonderful—not total, but with small background noises which contrasted with the stillness, in the same way the stars contrasted with the absolute blackness of the sky. The intensity of the night, as much as the cold, made me shiver a little, so as quickly as possible I replaced two of the three batteries in my headtorch, and watched as a cone of light expanded in front of me.

I was between cairns when the light died again, dwindling rapidly to a misleading glimmer. I could have cried with frustration, as I had no other batteries, but carried on trying to remember the general trend of the track through the heaped moraine. From time to time I would imagine I could see a cairn, only to find it a phantom, or merely a random pile of stones. The idea of spending the night out galled me, not so much because of the cold, which I was equipped to handle, but because of the endless series of jokes I would become the butt of. After four expeditions my greatest attributes were my ability to get lost on glaciers, and an unrivalled skill at rolling joints under adverse circumstances. Would the latter justify sending out a search party? I plodded on, falling down holes now and then to break the monotony, whilst trying to figure out if there was any way I could go badly wrong.

As I crawled out of a particularly nasty hole which I had briefly entertained the idea of bivvying in, a headlamp flashed in the distance, and after much shouting two huge figures homed in on my position. An embarrassed silence settled with the grim snow over our small group.

'Where've you been?' Tim asked.

'Oh, just lost on the glacier again,' I mumbled.

Tim grinned and began fiddling with a Walkie-Talkie he had extricated from the depths of his windsuit.

Jim, flashing a wild and evil smile, proffered a tupperware cup of liquid. I sniffed it suspiciously.

'I didn't think people who had exposure should drink alcohol?'

'You think you're suffering from exposure then lad?' Jim asked.

'Well, not really.'

Jim drained half the mug and passed it to me.

'Finish it off then youth.'

I finished the cup of whisky whilst Tim contacted ABC with our location. Tim replies to a question with 'lost again' and laughter, mixed with static, crackles out of the radio.

'Here we go again,' I think, but it's a warm thought.

From 'Sweet and sour', *Mountain*, no. 104 (1985), p. 28.

In addition to being a compliment, however, Wickwire's comment could also have implied that the very small group of unknown Australians was in over their heads.

The line that the Australians had chosen to attempt was certainly a formidable one. Everest's massive North Face is split by two prominent gullies, or couloirs. The narrower couloir on the west side of the face, the so-called 'Super Couloir',

was climbed by a Japanese expedition in 1980, but it was the other, larger couloir, the 'Great Couloir', that still attracted mountaineers and had been attempted by a strong American team in 1982. The Great Couloir was one of the last big routes still to be climbed on Everest (see image 11.2).

One of the problems with the Great Couloir route is that only the top part of the couloir can be climbed safely; an ice cliff partway up the gully subjects the bottom half to frequent avalanches and thus makes it extremely dangerous to climb. Getting to the top part of the couloir is not easy, however, and, as the Australian climbers would soon discover, negotiating the bottom part of the face to gain access to the couloir involves some of the most difficult and undoubtedly the most dangerous climbing on the entire face. Everest's considerable defences start at the very base of the mountain.

After much discussion, the Australians opted to breach Everest's lower defences by a steep spur to the right of the ice cliffs. It was more direct but technically harder than the circuitous, easier-angled route to the east that the Americans used in 1982 to gain access to the couloir. Above the spur, the Australians would have to find a way through a rock band and then traverse across a great shelf of moderately angled snow to gain the relatively safer upper reaches of the Great Couloir. It was this shelf of snow, which they dubbed 'White Limbo', that posed the biggest danger. White Limbo was not steep enough to immediately shed new snow, so it was prone, for some time after snowfalls, to send huge avalanches down the face below.

It was late August, three weeks after base camp had been established, and the climbers were finally in position to make their first tentative foray onto the face. They found a cone of avalanche debris to cross the *bergschrund*, a crevasse that separated the steep face from the relatively flat glacier, and, after years of planning, months of intense preparation and weeks of backbreaking load carrying, finally became the first Australians since George Ingle Finch in 1922 to set foot on Mt Everest.

The climbing was steep—steeper than they had expected—but they soon shook off the tension that came with suddenly finding oneself on steep terrain after months on the level and began to establish the slow, methodical rhythm that was essential to climb at high altitudes (see image 11.3). It was a most productive first day. Several hundred metres of rope were fixed up the spur and a few loads were carried up. A second day on the spur pushed the route up another hundred or so metres, where a shallow hole was dug to store the gear that had been hauled up to that point.

Just when it looked like steady progress might be made, the weather broke and heavy snowfalls belted the north side of the mountain. There was no choice but to retreat and the team decided to descend all the way to advanced base camp as it would take several days after the snow stopped for the slopes to become safe again and they did not want to consume the valuable food and fuel stores at camp one.

After so much load carrying on the Rongbuk Glacier, being forced back off the mountain after only two days of climbing could have had devastating repercussions for morale. Hall, Macartney-Snape, Henderson and Mortimer had, however, faced that sort of stop-start climbing on Annapurna II the previous year and had developed the patience to cope with it. They were helped too by the presence of Narayan and Tenzing, who had served them so well on the Annapurna II expedition and had been invited on the Everest trip to help with load carrying lower on the mountain and with camp chores.

‘The days passed easily in different combinations of reading, eating, talking and sleeping,’ Hall recalled. ‘I spent the sunny mornings doing yoga. There was no urgency to do anything. We could afford no room for impatience; attempting to act before the conditions were right would be foolhardy and dangerous.’⁷

Conditions had improved enough after a week at advanced base camp that Bartram, Mortimer and Henderson, accompanied by Monteath and Duff of the film crew, moved back up to camp one. On arriving at the tents, they made the first of two nasty discoveries that set back the expedition. The first was relatively minor. The food at the camp had been raided—probably by the furry little rodents called pikas that roamed the Rongbuk—the most serious loss being cheese and some chocolate bars. On the other hand, no-one, particularly Andy Henderson, seemed to lament the loss of some freeze-dried rations: ‘I could only hope the freeze-dried macaroni cheese would have the same effect on the little bastards as it had on humans, in which case they would have a short life but a constipated one.’⁸

The second discovery was far more serious. As the three climbers plodded across the neve of the Rongbuk Glacier, they found among avalanche debris bits of the tent and other gear they had stashed at the top of the fixed ropes. That was stark evidence that their route was not safe and that they would have to be extraordinarily careful in returning to the route after snowfalls. Any misjudgment could easily mean the loss of lives as well as of gear.

A further blow came when Bartram, Mortimer and Henderson arrived at the bergschrund at the base of the face. The climbers had left there a stash of gear—crampons, harnesses, ice axes and hammers—that they did not want to haul repeatedly between camp one and the face. The gear had been left on a ledge at the back of the bergschrund, a place they believed to be protected from any conceivable avalanche. The avalanche that obliterated the dump higher on the face had indeed missed the bergschrund in which the gear was stored but after much poking and digging the gear could not be found.

⁷ Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 8.

⁸ Henderson, A. 1985, ‘Sweet and sour’, *Mountain*, no. 104, pp. 28–33.

The next day, Hall and Macartney-Snape arrived from advanced base camp and, for the next 48 hours, the scene at the bottom of the face looked more like one from an archaeological expedition than a mountaineering one. A large pit was dug in the most likely spot and subsidiary holes were dug in surrounding areas. Some of the members poked around with ski poles that extended into avalanche probes and Macartney-Snape, acting in desperation on a suggestion from Jim Duff, even resorted to divining for the gear, much to Henderson's amusement:

One of my most enduring memories of the expedition is of Tim solemnly tramping around on this vast cone of avalanche debris 'dousing' for gear with two pack stays lashed together. He had a few problems getting volunteers to work on his random pits, and soon even he had given up.⁹

Nothing worked. After an exhausting spell of digging at 6400 m, the search was called off. Henderson, as usual, saw the light side of the situation: 'In one stroke we went from one of the most hideously over-equipped expeditions ever to leave Oz to one of the lightest ever to consider Everest.'¹⁰

Fortunately, replacements could be found for most of the gear. Some of the climbers had brought spare boots, harnesses could be improvised from nylon webbing and much of the other climbing gear could be borrowed from the film crew, who themselves were climbers and had been equipped by Channel Nine in the hope of ascending partway up the face to do some filming high on the mountain. By then, however, it was obvious that the route, even low on the face, would be too dangerous and difficult for climbers wielding heavy cameras and their accessories. The film crew's climbing gear could therefore be spared.

The one problem that was not readily solved was finding a replacement for Macartney-Snape's climbing boots. None of the film crew's boots came close to fitting his very large feet. He eventually was forced to wear as the inner boots his cross-country ski boots, which just fitted inside a very large pair of 'fabric-over boots/gaiters' that Bartram had brought along as spares (mountaineering boots consist of an insulated, flexible inner boot inside a rigid, plastic shell somewhat like a downhill ski boot). Macartney-Snape was able to make them semi-rigid by clipping on an old pair of 'footfang' crampons, thus turning them into serviceable climbing boots. The lack of ankle support, however, gave the boots a tendency to slip off very steep terrain, but once recognised, this problem could be managed. It was far from an ideal solution as it decreased the comfort and increased the risk of frostbite, but Macartney-Snape had no other option.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

A period of settled weather followed the cessation of the storm and the big avalanche, so the team made their second foray onto the face. It was an eventful few days, highlighted by some difficult mixed climbing, a case of snow blindness and an unexpected monstrous avalanche that nearly buried camp two before it was even established.

The first priority as the climbers worked their way back up the fixed ropes was to quickly push higher up the wall and find a secure place for the next camp. The one major obstacle—a narrow rock band—was overcome by the skilled Mortimer, who climbed a short gully with one crampon on and the other off to handle the difficult, mixed ice and rock terrain. In climbing the gully, however, Mortimer had taken his sunglasses off for a few hours and consequently contracted snow blindness—a temporary but painful condition that kept him tent-bound for a day or two.

Above the rock band, Hall and Macartney-Snape found a rib of snow that they thought might offer a good spot for camp two (see image 11.4). They decided to put in a snow cave at 6900 m on the rib. It was a long way from camp one, but there was no feasible place lower. As compensation, the rib had commanding views of the Rongbuk Valley and the peaks to the north and west of Everest. More importantly, being a raised ridge off the face, it gave considerable protection against avalanches; any slide would be split by the continuation of the rib above and would be funnelled into the Great Couloir on one side or onto White Limbo on the other.

Just as Hall was working on the snow cave, an avalanche of truly Himalayan proportions cut loose from somewhere higher on the mountain and poured over the lower face, filling the couloir, scouring White Limbo and blasting right over the top of the rib as well. Hall was nearly buried at the camp two site and Mortimer and Macartney-Snape, who were coming up below, saved themselves by clinging desperately to the fixed ropes. Obviously, nowhere on the lower part of the face was completely safe from avalanches of the size that Everest produced, although camp two was hit only by airborne snow, with the more solid snow passing on either side.

Dicing with death on Everest's North Face

Lincoln Hall

The snow was deep and firm, in perfect condition for a snow cave. Tim headed back down to fetch another load and to help Greg, while I set about digging the cave.

The first task was to dig a ledge across the Face, wide enough and long enough for us to sit on while we attached our crampons to our boots, and so that we could lounge about and enjoy our afternoon tea on beautiful days such as this. Having room to move around outside, unroped, did away with the feeling of being trapped by constant danger.

Once I had dug a ledge the size of a single bed, I began to tunnel into the slope at the far end. There was a lot of snow to be shifted, but with the snow-shovel I could carve large blocks which I then rolled down the slope, and so made good progress. Every half hour or so I would take a five-minute rest to have a drink, eat some chocolate and admire the incredible panorama around me. After two and a half hours I had a hole big enough to sit a couple of people. It was an awkward size because there was not enough room to wield the shovel efficiently. I was crouched inside when I heard the familiar 'Whoompf!' of an avalanche.

Sounds like a big one, I thought, I'll have a look at that.

I stepped out onto my narrow ledge and looked across towards the West Shoulder where I expected to see the avalanche. There was nothing. I turned to face the North Col. Nothing there either. With horror I realised the only other possibility. I jerked my head up to see the sky filled with huge clouds of snow, seconds away from sweeping me off the mountain. There was nowhere to go but into my embryo snow cave. As soon as I had flung myself inside, the avalanche hit. Thousands of tonnes of snow poured over the entrance. There seemed to be a real danger of being buried alive. I crawled out onto the ledge I had cut into the slope and pressed myself against the wall. There at least I would be buried less deeply. Snow was forced into my nostrils and my mouth as I breathed so I covered my face with my hands.

'Please don't let the whole slope be swept away,' I said aloud, not so much to anybody or anything, but in the irrational hope that voicing my wish would make survival more likely.

After several minutes the slide of snow lessened and finally stopped. The air was full of snow swirling in the wake of the avalanche. The late afternoon sun glinted from the tiny flakes, reminding me of the facts which at that moment needed no further emphasis—how beautiful is the world, how good it is to be alive.

I gave a whoop of delight, then sobered with worry about the fate of Greg and Tim. I shouted and heard an answering cry. Somebody was alive at least. When I tried to hold my ice-axe I realised that my whole body was shaking with the shock. Not wanting to trust my trembling legs I crawled along our tracks to where I could peer down the steep slope. Greg was only fifty metres below.

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah!' was the feeble reply.

'What about Tim?'

'He was answering nature. His clothes are full of snow.'

Greg's answer told nothing of Tim's safety but his manner implied he must be all right. I lay back in the snow and laughed hysterically. It was the biggest avalanche I had ever seen, let alone been underneath.

'Lincoln!' There was an urgency in Greg's voice.

I stood up and listened.

'I'm soaking wet and really cold. If I'm not there soon come and give me a hand.'

'Do you want me to take your pack?'

'No, it's just that I'm cold.'

'Okay. You're nearly at camp. Give me a yell if you need me.'

The sun was sinking low in the sky. Time to return to digging the night's shelter. Soon the cave was big enough for me to work in more quickly. When I bulldozed the accumulation of snow off the ledge with my boots Greg was just arriving. He looked worn out and was shivering violently. The snow of the avalanche had worked its way down his neck and sleeves and into his pockets so that now his clothes were quite wet.

He sat down to catch his breath while I pulled dry clothes out of his pack and listened to his story. Both he and Tim had seen the avalanche fly over the ice cliff above and had thought how impressive it would be watching it roar down the Great Couloir. As it tumbled closer and closer they realised it was too huge to be contained in the Couloir. There was nothing they could do but watch it fly over the edge of the rib and bear down on them. Tim, who was in the process of doing up his trousers, threw himself back to the fixed rope where he had attached his pack and hung on with all his might. Greg, who was firmly tied to the fixed rope a little way above, was swept off the slope. The snow poured over him, stretching the fixed rope as the force of the avalanche tried to drag him down. Then it was gone, leaving them stunned but uninjured.

'It took my mind away from my aching eyes for a while,' he said in conclusion. 'Pass me the radio, will you. Camp I has got to hear about this.'

From *White Limbo*, 1985, Weldons, Sydney, pp. 162–3. Re-published in May 2007 by Random House Australia.

That narrow escape from death for Hall, Mortimer and Macartney-Snape was the last straw for Bartram. A man who had spent much of his adult life living and working in the mountains, he had seen enough of Everest's character to know that the North Face was too dangerous for him. The loss of such an experienced mountaineer was a severe blow to such a small team, but everyone respected Bartram's right to make his own judgment about how much risk he was willing to accept.

Meanwhile back at 6900 m on the face, Hall and Macartney-Snape, who reasoned that the huge avalanche surely had cleaned the upper face of unstable snow, dug in at camp two and, with Henderson and Mortimer in support, pushed the route out further by anchoring the rest of the fixed rope above camp two onto the creaky slopes of White Limbo. Another day's effort got them to the top of White Limbo, where they dumped some gear and food to be picked up on the summit attempt.

Pleased with their work—five consecutive, energetic days at about 7000 m—Hall and Macartney-Snape then descended to advanced base camp for a rest. The retreat was most timely, as another storm was brewing when they began to climb down from the top of the fixed ropes. This time it was not a monsoonal snowstorm, but the first of the winter storms characterised by vicious winds and bitter cold. It was a stark reminder of the life-threatening conditions they would face higher on the mountain. Even more ominously, as Hall noted, a storm with such high winds in September meant that the window of settled autumn weather—the break they needed to climb the mountain—might never come that year.

Winter had arrived at Camp I. Apparently the calm season of autumn had been overlooked. No trees existed; no disposable leaves gave advance notice of change. In Tibet, the rugged lines of the landscape suited the sudden changes in climate. The storms of the monsoon had changed to the clear, cold skies of winter.¹¹

Hall paid for his skirmish with the winter-style storm. He developed a severe cough—probably associated with a chest infection and certainly more serious than the normal high-altitude hack that nearly all Himalayan climbers were afflicted with during the course of an expedition. Several days' rest at advanced base camp helped but it was a much weakened Hall who set out with his four colleagues at the first sign of settled weather. This time the climbers were going for the top, using camp two as the staging post for an alpine-style attempt on the summit. There was no selection of a summit team; all five climbers would continue up the mountain together until one or more had to drop back. By this time, Bartram had judged, with the shift to winter weather, that the avalanche risk had diminished enough for him to take part in the climbing again.

11 Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 8.

Hall's departure from the summit team came frustratingly soon. Just in crossing the neve of the Rongbuk it became painfully clear that he was in no physical condition to go back up onto the face. He lagged far behind the others and when he arrived at a gear dump partway up the neve, he collapsed into a spasm of coughing. His decision was made for him; his body simply could not continue.

His illness was a bitter blow to Hall. He had been with Macartney-Snape from the very beginning of their mountaineering careers—first, that strong New Zealand season followed closely by the last-ditch success on Dunagiri, and then the ascents of Ama Dablam and Anyemaqen, the close call on Trisul and the intense high-altitude struggle to get to the top of Annapurna II. They had been through a lot together and now, with the biggest Himalayan prize of them all in sight, it was heartbreaking for Hall to watch the others, particularly Macartney-Snape, slowly diminish into tiny specks against the vastness of Everest's north wall and to realise that he had been reduced to a spectator for that final, absorbing, exhausting push to the top of the world.

As much as it was an immense personal frustration, Hall's departure from the summit attempt was also a severe blow to the rest of the team. Five was an extremely small team to be attempting a new route on Mt Everest, particularly one as formidable as the Great Couloir, and most of the climb still lay ahead of them. In addition, Hall had shown extraordinary commitment, courage and strength to fight off two serious mishaps on Annapurna II and still climb to the top. Just those qualities often spell the difference between one climber making the last 300 or 400 m of Everest's rarefied summit pyramid and another falling short.

The other four made the snow cave at camp two by mid-afternoon but the promise of settled weather that the clear, calm morning had brought was receding quickly. It was already blowing again at camp two and a huge plume was flying off the summit. Furthermore, the weather forecast issued from Kathmandu, Nepal, for mountaineers was for cold temperatures and continuing high winds the next day—definitely not good climbing weather. The forecast proved accurate, so Macartney-Snape, Henderson, Mortimer and Bartram were forced to descend the next morning and spend yet another period of waiting, this time at camp one.

There was little point in the climbers waiting out the weather at camp two on the face. In addition to consuming the precious supplies of food and fuel they had worked so hard to haul up to the camp, they would be hastening the process of physical deterioration that occurred with extended periods at high altitude.

Coping with high altitude is very much a matter of trying to optimise two conflicting phenomena. At the beginning of an expedition, when climbers are still relatively fit and healthy, the main impediment to climbing high is lack of acclimatisation. As time passes and increasingly higher trips are made on the mountain, the body

adjusts to the lack of oxygen and begins to operate more and more efficiently. After a certain period, however, usually several weeks, at relatively high altitudes (5800 m or higher), the body begins to deteriorate, slowly at first and then more rapidly, from the chronic shortage of oxygen. Picking the best time to climb a Himalayan mountain is thus a matter of reaching the top of the acclimatisation curve before the inevitable slide down the deterioration curve begins. Of course, many other factors, such as weather and avalanche danger, have a crucial impact on when a summit attempt can be made.

For the Australian mountaineers making the country's first attempt on Mt Everest, it was the weather that forced them onto the deterioration curve. They had spent nearly two months at base camp and above and had some weeks earlier reached the optimum level of acclimatisation. They could not acclimatise any further no matter how much more time they spent at high altitude. On the other hand, they had almost surely started the slow physical slide; they could not get any stronger, no matter how well they ate and drank. The enforced rest at camp one, on the other hand, at least gave Hall more time to get over his respiratory illness and join the others on another summit bid.

Near the end of September 1984, then, the situation did not look good for the Australian attempt on Mt Everest. Lincoln Hall was struggling to overcome his respiratory problems and all of the climbers were caught in a classic Himalayan catch-22. Each day of waiting meant less strength and more likelihood of the intense cold, windy winter conditions on the summit of Everest. Each day of waiting thus meant a reduced chance of climbing the mountain. To become impatient, however, and push up when the conditions were not right meant almost certain failure, very probably frostbite and possibly death.

The American expedition therefore looked to be in a very good position to snatch the Great Couloir prize. They were well established on the North Ridge, at a point where they could traverse into the couloir above the icefall and were prepared to use supplementary oxygen to climb the mountain. They had not, however, counted on the Australians' extraordinary measure of patience and persistence—qualities that had seen them through a remarkable ascent of Annapurna II and which were being tested just as severely on Everest. If Macartney-Snape had his way, there would be no giving in to the weather, no matter how long it took for the winds to ease.

‘The hardest part of climbing a mountain like Everest is the waiting for something that is totally unpredictable and over which you have no control. You have to maintain the burning drive to succeed when doubts can quell the hottest of desires.’¹²

12 Macartney-Snape, ‘Mt Everest, the Australian ascent’.

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.