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An unforgettable face

The 27th of September dawned cold and clear at camp one. More importantly, it was not windy. The previous day had been similarly fine but the climbers had decided to stay put. They did not want to waste precious energy to climb to camp two only to be fooled by another brief break in the post-monsoon winds; what they desperately needed was a spell of fine, calm weather lasting several days.

A mixture of excitement and determination pervaded the group as they marched up the neve of the Rongbuk Glacier towards the base of the face and the start of the fixed ropes. The forced rest at camp one had allowed Hall enough time to recover from his respiratory complaint and he was now moving strongly. His return to the team was a great morale booster, as his experience and skill would be essential to such a small, vulnerable team high on Everest.

At camp two, the climbers settled in to the now familiar snow cave for a night's rest before tackling White Limbo and launching themselves into the unknown of the Great Couloir the next day. Yet again, however, their hopes were dashed by the weather. During the night, the wind rose and by morning it was howling across the North Face of Everest. To attempt to climb high on the mountain in such weather would be suicidal.

Again the climbers were forced into a waiting game, this time in the snow cave at camp two. There was a great reluctance to retreat back to camp one now, as there was a limit to how many trips the weakening climbers could make up and down before they dissipated too much energy. They sensed that this time it would be a mistake to descend; if they did, they might not have enough energy left to get back up.

As one enforced rest day dragged into another, morale began to slump. 'Failure to climb a mountain because it was technically too difficult, or because one's reserves of strength were inadequate, was acceptable,' Hall said, 'but to return home without making a solid attempt for the top because the weather conditions did not allow it was intolerable.'¹

By the third day of inactivity in the cramped snow cave of camp two, that 'burning drive to succeed' that must be maintained in the face of adversity was definitely beginning to wane. 'Another day of this and I'll go mad,' Henderson moaned. 'You'll have to improvise a strait-jacket out of my down suit.'²

Bartram was more direct, particularly when the prospect of another trip down to camp one was discussed. 'When I go down from here,' he said, 'that's it. I'm not coming up again. We've been here for two months, and that's enough. It's time for me to get on with the other things in my life.'³ Hall too was not keen on the idea of yet another descent to the glacier. Only Mortimer and Macartney-Snape were determined, no matter how long it took for the weather to stabilise, to climb the mountain.

The fierce wind on the north side of Everest seemed to mock the climbers' predicament, as it rose to ever greater intensity during the night. In the morning, however, the gales suddenly dropped and the doubts and frustrations of the previous few days vaporised into the cold, still air as the five climbers prepared to move higher up the mountain.

Above the snow cave, the route followed the ropes previously fixed up White Limbo, the snow on which had consolidated with the onset of the colder autumn weather and now seemed much safer. Even though there were fixed ropes to follow, the climbing was slow and difficult as the weight of the climbers, with their heavy packs, often caused their boots to break through the firm crust into the soft snow beneath.

About halfway up the slope, the summit attempt ended for Bartram. He was suffering from headaches and blurred vision and began to feel dizzy and weak in the legs. The symptoms were most likely those of cerebral oedema, in which fluid collected in the brain. It is a most serious condition and an afflicted climber who does not descend promptly faces extreme risk of dying.

1 Hall, L. 1985, *White Limbo*, Weldons, Sydney, ch. 10.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

The experienced Bartram was able to diagnose the symptoms in himself—something that many other mountaineers have failed to do—and did not hesitate in offloading his communal gear to Henderson and descending to camp two for yet another night in the snow cave. The mountain had already begun the process of choosing the eventual summit team.

As the afternoon wore on, the others reached the end of the fixed ropes at the top of White Limbo, picked up the gear that had been stashed there weeks earlier and one by one began to traverse across the slopes towards the Great Couloir. It had been a satisfying day's climbing. After all the frustrations of the weather-induced delays, the climbers had ascended more than 600 m, passed their previous high point and finally entered the Great Couloir itself. The crowning touch was to find a natural snow cave formed by a partially open crevasse. That meant that the four could sleep in far more comfort than their one small tent would afford without the time and effort needed to dig a snow cave themselves.

More fine weather followed the next day. There were a few gentle gusts of icy wind, but nothing like the continuous gales that had buffeted the mountain a few days earlier. It appeared that a period of settled weather had arrived. This was just the break the climbers were waiting for; it was now or never.

Slowly, the four exited the cave and began the exhausting haul up the couloir (see image 12.1). They stepped into a surreal atmosphere as streams of fine snow, sparkling in the early morning sun, meandered down the broad gully and intermittently engulfed their legs. It was as if they were performing a slow, tortured ballet on a vertical white stage.

The climbing, although not difficult, certainly was not without danger. The angle of the face was only about 45 degrees—not steep enough to require a rope and belays—and the snow was firm bordering on icy: perfect conditions for cramponing. The hard snow meant, however, that any slip or fall would almost certainly be fatal; there would be little hope of a sliding climber being able to use his axe to arrest his fall.

Climbing the Great Couloir, despite its spectacular position and awesome views, had very few elements of pleasure, as Hall remembered:

I put the radio away and began to climb again. Half my mind concentrated on keeping my balance and on other fine points of not falling off. The rest of my mind devoted itself to the mechanical movements of climbing. There was not enough oxygen for my mind to cope with more than those few thoughts.

Shortly, the angle of the slope eased to about forty degrees. Looking up, the snow slope seemed endless. Somewhere above the Couloir it merged into steep rock, but that was too far away to worry about. All I could do was to take one step and make sure it was followed by another. Twenty steps then a rest, then twenty steps again.

Every now and then I used the view as an excuse for a longer rest. It was heartening to see the enormous bulk of Changtse fall further and further beneath my feet. My slow pace was getting me somewhere after all. Andy, whom I had passed earlier, was catching up. Above, Tim was now ahead of Greg but overall there was not much difference in our speeds. We were all climbing well and felt as strong as one could hope to feel at almost 8,000 metres.

The walls of rock flanking the Couloir began to close in, bringing with them a feeling of hostility. It was no place for humans. There was no air, no water, no hope. I shook my head and fought away the pressure of those negative thoughts. It's just another mountain, I told myself. It's just another climb.⁴

Slowly, the climbers worked their way towards the top of the Great Couloir. As the afternoon wore on and shadows crept across the gully, bringing with them an instant, dramatic drop in temperature, Macartney-Snape and Mortimer began the search for a campsite. This time there was no convenient crevasse to provide a ready-made snow cave; the best the pair could find was a slightly more gently angled spur on which a ledge could be levelled for the tent.

Hall was the last to arrive as his three colleagues fumbled with the tent poles in the bitter cold. The thin pieces of nylon and slender aluminium poles were all that stood between the climbers and the elements high on the side of Everest.

They had climbed to about 8150 m that day, higher than any of them had ever been before and well within the 'death zone', the region above 8000 m where physical deterioration is rapid. They coped the best they could with the stoves, the exceedingly cramped quarters and their failing appetites to drink at least some liquids and down a little bit of food. With the oxygen concentration well below half that at sea level, sleep was intermittent and light.

In the morning, the weather again appeared to be stable; there was little wind around the tent and the camp one team reported by radio that no plume of snow was blowing off the summit. It was 3 October 1984, more than 62 years since Australian George Ingle Finch made his desperate push for the top in much the same area. This day would see the only attempt the Australians could make. There was no question of another attempt; they would not have the strength.

Their bodies numbed by the intense cold and their minds slowed by the lack of oxygen, they methodically brewed up some tea and put on their boots, crampons and down suits. At that altitude, there are no 'alpine', or very early morning, starts and there is no possibility of hurrying those routine tasks. The cold and thin air see to that.

4 Ibid., ch. 11.

Mortimer was the first away from the tent, followed by Macartney-Snape and Henderson. The climbers initially had to traverse across the width of the Great Couloir and up towards the rock band that blocked the top of the couloir. Although it was straightforward climbing, it was painstakingly slow at that altitude. The rock band at the top of the couloir was in deep shade, thus very cold, and likely to remain so for much of the day so the climbers opted to traverse over to the so-called Yellow Band, which was in the sun.

By the time they reached the Yellow Band, Macartney-Snape was in front and led up a ramp that formed a natural break in the band. It was mixed climbing on rock and ice or, more accurately, ‘bad snow on poor rock’,⁵ according to Macartney-Snape. Beyond the ramp, he pushed up through the rest of the band in climbing that would be difficult and dangerous at any altitude, but was even more so above 8000 m. Macartney-Snape dropped a rope to secure Mortimer as he climbed the steep section of rock (see image 12.2), but by the time Henderson had reached that point, the other two were too far above to drop the rope—the only one they were carrying. Henderson had to climb it without protection.

Meanwhile, Hall had turned back. The last to leave the tent, he had slowly traversed across the couloir and then realised that his body, and particularly his extremities, were not warming up with the climbing. Hall had been battling cold hands and feet throughout the climb, more so than the others, and did not want another dose of frostbite. He had lost parts of two toes after his two nights out on the summit ridge of Dunagiri six years earlier. Everest had trimmed the summit team to three.

Above the Yellow Band, Macartney-Snape and Mortimer had passed the major difficulties. What remained was the grim, morale-destroying battle with fatigue, extreme lack of oxygen and fading light. The summit was so tantalisingly close but the day was slipping away so fast.

Macartney-Snape was carrying a small tape recorder and described the tremendous effort required by climbing over even easy ground above 8500 m:

You do six steps and you're totally exhausted...Breath just can't come out any faster. Your whole being is just absorbed in the task of breathing.

It's a beautiful day, a perfect day. Not a breath of wind, a little bit of high cloud. I suppose it's getting on in the day...must be about three o'clock. Plenty of puffy clouds all over Nepal. 1500 feet to go and it's three o'clock—can we make it in time? Who knows...Watching the sun, since my watch is covered up by clothing, the sun is the only way of telling. Anyway, that's the 'real' time.⁶

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

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

Later, he again recorded his feelings:

‘This...is going to be...the hardest day of my life...physically...and mentally...the summit is somewhere up there...How far? I’m not quite sure...but the sun is sinking fast and we’ve got to make it before sunset...The view up here is absolutely just incredible. It’s hard to believe I’m near the top of Mt Everest...Two to four steps and you’re exhausted...but couldn’t have asked for a more perfect day.’⁷

Just on dusk, Tim Macartney-Snape became the first Australian to stand on the summit of Mt Everest. Greg Mortimer joined him a short while later (see image 12.3). It was a remarkable performance in every respect by the pair, but particularly so by Macartney-Snape. Most climbers, even those breathing bottled oxygen, are so exhausted by the time they reach the summit they are hardly able to speak, and those few who climb Everest without supplementary oxygen are so close to their limits they can barely function. Macartney-Snape not only carried a movie camera and filmed Mortimer climbing onto the summit, he brought along the tape recorder and made a short speech on the summit. His thoughtful and heartfelt words on the environment and nuclear war were more eloquent than most people’s utterances at sea level.

The Australian team nearly had a third member on the summit. Henderson stopped just 50 vertical metres short of the top. He had been slowed by a broken crampon, which forced him to stop and effect a repair before he could safely move on. More than costing time and probably the summit, the repair cost Henderson his fingers, as he had to take off his outer, insulating mittens. The intense cold quickly froze his fingers.

Perhaps the hardest part of climbing Everest was yet to come for the trio: getting down safely. Macartney-Snape and Mortimer spent about 20 minutes on the summit before beginning the descent. The two summiters picked up Henderson near where he had stopped to repair his crampon. His hands were useless; Macartney-Snape had to dig Henderson’s prescription glasses out of his pack and exchange his sunglasses for them so he could see in the dark. The intense cold and darkness made the retreat difficult, particularly since they had only one weak torch between the three of them.

It was easier and less dangerous in the dark to traverse to the top of the Great Couloir. The 30 m wall that remained too deep in the frozen shade on the ascent could be descended by abseil; the only problem was an anchor, as they had no snow stakes. Macartney-Snape’s inventiveness came to the rescue. He removed one of the aluminium staves from Mortimer’s pack and buried it in the snow—definitely not a textbook anchor but it would have to do.

⁷ Ibid.

At camp four, an anxious Hall was awaiting the arrival of his colleagues. He had the stove purring away during the late afternoon and had two billies full of liquid awaiting the exhausted climbers. The importance of that simple task should not be overlooked. By showing maturity and good judgment and not pushing himself past his limits to attain the world's highest peak—a temptation that other climbers have succumbed to and for which they have paid the ultimate price—Hall was in a position to ensure the survival of his compatriots. He provided liquids and organised them in sleeping-bags—mundane operations that Henderson could not perform because of his fingers, Mortimer could not manage because of his exhausted state and even the indestructible Macartney-Snape would have found exceedingly difficult.

The summit of Everest...nearly

Andy Henderson

'Andy...'

'Uhn...'

'Not coming...too cold...too slow...'

'Uhn...OK.' On the day of the summit attempt Lincoln was dropping out.

The huddled figure in the shadows of the Great Couloir, bent double with the effort of conversation, looked small and very alone, from my position high on the Yellow Band. Lincoln means many things to me, but I'm not used to thinking of him as either small, or alone—it was unsettling. I had similar feelings two days before, as Geof, after giving me his share of the communal gear, had disappeared down the fixed rope. Geof has the powerful style and finely tuned survival instincts that come from keeping accountants, and the like, alive in the mountains of South America. His decision to retreat in the face of overwhelming altitude problems was unavoidable, and had to be made before leaving the fixed ropes, which ended at about 25,000 ft, but I knew he would be bitterly disappointed. Never a peak bagger, Geof delighted in getting high just to see what he could see, and would have loved to have made it to 8,000 m. I could feel his distress through the thin air.

I had my own problems now and was not able to give Lincoln the sympathy he deserved, and perhaps needed. The gentlest of people, he has a flair for disorganisation which could make others weep with frustration. It never ceased to amaze me, then, how good he was at getting expeditions financed, and then to the bottom of their chosen mountain. Once there he generally contrived to reach the top somehow.

I concentrated on steadying my breathing for a few seconds then shouted down, 'Can you... see Tim?'

'Uhn...above you...on snow.'

More deep breaths, then 'Need a rope...crampon broken.'

'Too far...'

Christ! All thoughts of Lincoln fled from my mind, and I found myself panting furiously. I was too terrified to try and downclimb the shattered limestone of the rock band, and the ground appeared to ease off ahead, so onwards and upwards. But first the crampon. By wedging the pick of my axe between two rocks I was able to tremble down on one leg and take the bloody thing off.

The binding post had broken, but the damage would be repairable once I was in a less intimidating position. With the crampon off I struggled up to the brow of the rock band, scaring myself badly several times in the process. Suddenly Greg and Tim appeared above me, half hidden by a change in angle of the slope.

'Broke a crampon...need a rope.'

'Too far...keep going.'

'Come down...?'

'No...keep going...nearly there.'

Tim hadn't lied, and soon I had scrambled to the top of the rock. Above me stretched a steep snow slope, and then, where I had seen the others, the ground kicked back. A few minutes later I understood Tim's reluctance to move onto this steep slope again. The snow was rubbishy beyond belief, and I wondered what held it in place, especially as it now had a deep diagonal trench slicing through it.

I held my breath and tottered out across the nauseating junk until I was in striking distance of the top. By lashing out with my axe, and scrabbling wildly with my feet, I was able to flop over on the easier ground, and into a new and wonderful world. I lay, like a beached jellyfish, on the edge of a vast, blazing white shelf. At first this plane of wind-smooth snow appeared to hang suspended in mid-air, but looking behind me I saw the eastern edge of the slope was bounded by the upper extension of the Great Couloir, and the upper edge by a high band of black rock. The right hand end and lower edges ended abruptly in space. The whole arrangement was gently tilted at an angle of about 20 degrees.

Some distance above I could see two figures moving up and towards an obvious ramp between the couloir and the rock band. Moving over to a dry patch of flat pebbles I collapsed, and tried to figure out how to repair my broken crampon. Tim had the only rope, 50m of 9mm, and there was no way I was going to let myself be separated from it any further than was absolutely necessary. I worked as fast as possible, my hands stripped to a single layer of inner gloves for the job.

Tim, long and gangly on first inspection is, in fact, a nuclear powered magician. Greg is, superficially, a much more human creature—at least he drinks—but disappointingly is a real fiend when it comes to technical climbing, and past experience showed that he had a fair working relationship with any of the local mountain gods, from Tibet to Bolivia. The two of them were moving pretty nicely, given the altitude, and in the twenty minutes it took me to fix my gear and pull my gloves on again they had disappeared.

Above the Black Band I found Greg's pack in a pile of rocks, and dumped my own next to it. Tim had taken no pack, preferring to store everything he needed in the pockets of his wind-suit. The two were in sight again, and I took off in hopeless pursuit across another hanging plain, steeper this time, to some desperate moves on [a] few metres of mixed ground, and then diagonally right towards the West Ridge. When I reached it the others had disappeared—again.

I stood on the ridge, huddling against the thin, lazy wind, and saw the long shadow of Gyachung Kang, to the west, reaching out across the glaciers and lesser peaks towards me. I felt lonely, and out of my depth. It would be dark in a few minutes, and I would be left like an idiot, standing 50 m below the peak of the highest mountain on earth, blind in my prescription glacier glasses, blind without. My rectangular glasses were in the top of my pack, somewhere below, and I was separated from them by several hundred metres of steep slab, and at least one tricky section of mixed ground. I turned immediately, and started retracing my steps, hoping to make it across the mixed ground before it became too dark, hoping that I wouldn't have to wait too long at the packs for the others.

As it was, Greg nearly cramponed my hand as I removed it from the last of the rock—I doubt I would have felt it. I was unbelievably pleased to see the pair again, but neither appeared to be in significantly better shape than myself. Silently we descended to our packs, our only rope, our only headtorch. I don't think I even asked if they had summited.

At the packs, my hands which had happily clutched the head of my axe now refused to grasp the zippers on the top of my pack. I was puzzled by this, and spent a few moments staring at them whilst my brain attempted communication. They continued to be wilful and disobedient.

'Tim...can't manage the zippers...give me a hand with my glasses?'

Wordlessly he changed my glasses, but by this time the only things visible were what Tim's torch washed over.

Greg and Tim must have talked over the descent route previously, because the only discussion during the following few hours concerned bivvying. The idea was quickly dismissed. Descent by the way we had come up was out of the question as we didn't have enough rope to make it down the Yellow Band in one go, and didn't even have any snow anchors, much less rock gear. The logical route was to descend the Great Couloir, and hope that when we reached rock the rope would be long enough.

Hundreds of metres of down climbing soon thrashed shattered muscles to numbness. The ground was steep enough to warrant facing the slope, and the sight of the headtorch bobbing around below, and between, my feet, combined with the measured, rhythmic movements of my body to paralyse the mind. Tim would be weaving his spells, Greg would be in survival mode, haggling with the mountain over the whys and wherefores of life and death, and I was comfortably numb, and cruising.

Several lifetimes dragged past.

Eventually voices started below, and the light danced about in an unaccustomed pattern. An abseil was being rigged—later I discovered we had abbed off Greg's pack buried in the last margins of snow—and Greg disappeared with the headtorch. Finally a muffled shout drifted up and it was time to move. By the time I reached the end of the rope, which seemed to terminate a distressing distance above anything that might have been called easy ground, my crampon had come off again. Tim appeared from somewhere, worked his magic, and I was soon doing climber impersonations again. It was only a 100 m or so to our Super Diamond, and the eastern side of the couloir was bathed in an elegant silver light from the moon, but now I was in the grip of a powerful lethargy, and it irked me to have to move at all. Tim and Greg had vanished in the moonlight, and it was a long and lonely journey to the tent.

I collapsed through the tent door, where Lincoln packed me into a pit and fed me hot drinks. Greg was slumped unconscious on one side of the tent, Tim fought impotently with the laces of his ski boots, I dribbled tea over frozen claws and sleeping bags with equal dispassion, and Lincoln was on the radio discussing our condition with Jim, and arranging for Geof to move back up to the snowcave (C2).

It was sometime past three in the morning, 16 hours after we had first left Camp 4. We were in a small tent, on an even smaller ledge, at 27,000 ft and I couldn't understand why Lincoln looked so worried.

From 'Sweet and sour', *Mountain*, no. 104 (1985), p. 33.

One by one, the climbers stumbled into the tent, with Henderson last. There were hugs and tears of joy and relief, but Henderson's severely frostbitten hands took the shine off the celebrations.

Macartney-Snape, Mortimer and Henderson were able to drift off to sleep, but Hall had problems:

At that height I found the dark claustrophobic. Sleep was supposed to be a state of rest but instead, as I dozed and my respiratory rate dropped, I plunged into a frightening world of suffocation. Opening my eyes did not relieve the panic because the darkness continued. There was nothing for my mind to hang on to in the swirling blackness. I breathed violently and deeply until at last I calmed down. Sleep was impossible so I lay in my sleeping bag and considered our situation.⁸

Only in the morning did the team's precarious predicament become fully apparent. Of the three who climbed to the top or nearly so, Macartney-Snape was capable of descending under his own steam but Mortimer and Henderson clearly needed help.

First, Hall and Macartney-Snape packed up Henderson's survival gear, split the rest of his belongings between them and got him ready for the long trip down the Great Couloir and across White Limbo. Henderson's hands had been frozen into

8 Ibid., ch. 12.

a 'gripping' position from the previous night's climbing, so it was an easy matter to insert the ice axe again. Apart from his hands, Henderson seemed to have survived the summit ordeal well and was able to descend without further assistance.

Mortimer, on the other hand, was in serious trouble. He lay semi-conscious in his sleeping-bag while the others got ready to leave and, when roused, was unable to get himself ready to descend. Hall and Macartney-Snape had to attach the crampons to his boots and then, apparently forgetting he had them on, he put a couple of large gashes in the bottom of the tent. He was either suffering from extreme exhaustion or, more ominously, the onset of cerebral oedema. In case it was the latter, he had to get to lower altitude as quickly as possible.

Hall began the descent with Mortimer, who had such well-developed climbing instincts that he was able to put himself in 'automatic' and down-climb securely, although very slowly. Macartney-Snape soon overtook the pair, after he and Hall had agreed that Hall was in the better shape and should stay with Mortimer. Hall had hoped to get Mortimer down to the snow cave at camp two that night. The elevation of 6900 m should bring considerable improvement if he was indeed suffering from cerebral oedema. Mortimer was, however, moving much too slowly to make camp two; they would have to settle for a night in the crevasse just above the ice cliffs that spanned the Great Couloir.

About 100 m above the crevasse, Hall watched in horror as Mortimer caught one of his crampons on the other leg of his down suit, fell head over heels and began cartwheeling down the slope. The ice cliffs loomed just below and a fall over them meant certain death. Somehow, as he tumbled towards the top of the cliffs, Mortimer flipped onto his stomach and slowed and then stopped his fall by plunging the shaft of his ice axe into the soft snow. Mortimer's climbing instincts had saved him. Both shaken by the near tragedy, Hall and Mortimer made their way into the crevasse and its roomy sleeping ledge.

Mortimer's condition seemed little improved by the descent of 700 m. He was unable to keep any food down and twice he kicked over and spilled billies of water that Hall had painstakingly melted from snow. Hall knew that they were not out of the woods yet.

In the morning, Mortimer was a little better. He was able to dress and prepare himself for the day's climbing and set out before Hall for the traverse across White Limbo to the top of the fixed ropes. This time, the descent went without incident and, after a brief stop at camp two to pack some gear and send it down ahead, the pair continued to the base of the face. By nightfall, Hall was back on the glacier with Colin Monteath and Mortimer was just above on the fixed ropes. Henderson had earlier descended from camp two, with assistance on the abseils from Geof Bartram. Macartney-Snape, in a phenomenal finish to a spectacular performance,

had climbed down all the way from camp four to the glacier and camp one in a single afternoon! The ordeal was over for all except Henderson, who was to face the trauma some months later of losing parts of all of his fingers.

Making history in style

The Australian ascent of Mt Everest was remarkable by almost any measure. Never before had the world's highest peak been climbed in such clean fashion or in such good style. Never before had a new route been climbed without the aid of supplemental oxygen. Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, in their historic first ascent of Everest without artificial oxygen in 1978, followed the standard South Col route, the one by which Hillary and Tenzing first climbed the mountain in 1953. In 1980, Messner again amazed the mountaineering world by climbing Everest solo without artificial oxygen. He scaled it by the North Ridge route—with little doubt the most straightforward and least technically difficult route on the mountain and a route that was climbed frequently. The Australians faced the same tremendous physiological problems of trying to climb to 8800 m without the aid of artificial oxygen, but in addition they had to cope with the psychological stress of climbing into uncharted territory, of facing unknown difficulties at the most extreme of altitudes.

Never before had a new route been climbed on Mt Everest by such a small party. All of the other significant new routes on the mountain had been climbed by much larger teams with much more support in the establishment of camps and the carrying of supplies. The 1953 British South Col and the 1975 British South-West Face expeditions are classic examples. Of the five Australian climbers who set out from Sydney to climb Mt Everest, two reached the summit, a third came extremely close and a fourth climbed beyond the highest camp; only one failed to get within striking distance of the summit. Considering the normal Everest attrition rate due to illness, fatigue, burn-out and altitude sickness, that is a phenomenal achievement.

The style in which Macartney-Snape and Mortimer reached the summit was near to the ideal alpine style. With only one camp established on the North Face—the snow cave of camp two at 6900 m—the five climbers set out on 27 September from the base of the face with most of what they would need for the summit attempt on their backs. Apart from consuming some food and fuel at camp two and collecting a small amount of gear at the top of the fixed ropes, they climbed the face in alpine style. Indeed, they climbed the 2000 m of the face in virtually pure alpine style, establishing camps as they climbed and carrying all food, fuel and climbing gear on their backs.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of all was the extraordinary patience and persistence demonstrated by the Australian team. At several points it would have been easy to say that 'we had given it a good go but the mountain won'. At other points it would have been tempting to push into questionable weather because of impatience and frustration at delays. The Australians, however, maintained the right balance of that burning desire to succeed and the judgment required to minimise the considerable risks from weather and unstable snow.

How did the outside world react to the Australian ascent? The authoritative British climbing magazine *Mountain* summed it up succinctly: 'It was a major feat by a small expedition, a new route without oxygen by the first Australian group to make the attempt.'⁹

Chris Bonington, the doyen of the British Himalayan mountaineering community, remarked:

It really was a superb achievement. I think I'm right in saying they were the smallest expedition ever to make a new route on Everest and they were also the only expedition to make a first ascent without using oxygen. They also seemed to have got on well together and to have tackled the whole climb in a relaxed and balanced way, by what I should imagine were the most appropriate means. So, yes, it was a superb achievement. Great!¹⁰

Doug Scott, along with Bonington the most experienced of the British Himalayan climbers, commented:

I think the 1984 Australian Everest Expedition was a particularly good one. I got letters about the trip from Jimmy Duff and it sounded like they had achieved a lot of respect for each other. It seemed that these lads had got it together enough to build up more energy as a group than anyone could produce for himself. With all that collective energy working in one direction, without anything in the way, it was a perfect trip, apart from poor old Andy getting frostbite.¹¹

In Australia, Chris Baxter, editor of *Wild*, described the climb as 'a major new route on the North Face. Achieved without artificial oxygen and under unusually difficult conditions by a small expedition (none of whom had previously been over 8,000 metres), it was a victory over the odds and a landmark for Australian mountaineering'.¹²

9 'Antipodean triumph and tragedy. Info—Greater Himalaya', *Mountain*, no. 102 (1985), p. 12.

10 Baxter, C. 1985, 'Chris Bonington in Australia. Interview', *Wild*, no. 16 (Autumn), pp. 26–9.

11 Chester, Q. 1986, 'Doug Scott, the mountaineer's mountaineer. Interview', *Wild*, no. 20 (Autumn), pp. 38–41.

12 Macartney-Snape, 'Mt Everest, the Australian ascent'.

The Australian popular press also saluted the Everest success. The *Sydney Morning Herald's* editorial comments are typical:

The Australian expedition has already been described by other climbers on the mountain as an all-time classic...As a direct ascent, the line chosen up the North Face by the Australians was aesthetically pleasing to mountain-climbers and remains the straightest and hardest route on the north face...The first Australian ascent of Mt Everest was achieved with courage, skill and spirit, something of which is summed up by the slogan on the expedition's T-shirt: 'Qomolangma: you might forget the name, but you won't forget the face.'¹³

The most immediate and perceptive comments came from the American climbers entrenched on the North Ridge, adjacent to the Great Couloir. Their view of the Australian team changed from one of a bunch of no-hopers who were no more than a curiosity to one of great admiration. Two of the most amazed of the Americans were the veterans Jim Wickwire and John Roskelley.

Roskelley in particular was in a good position to judge the Australian effort. America's most experienced high-altitude mountaineer, he had had two decades of hard climbing, with expeditions to Himalayan giants such as Everest, K2 and Makalu and successes on lower but extremely difficult peaks such as Cholatse. By the early 1980s, European superstar Reinhold Messner considered Roskelley to be the strongest Himalayan climber in the world.

Recalling the Australian ascent, Roskelley said:

Damned if one night we looked up and they were at almost 28,000 feet, going really slow. We thought, 'No way are they going to make the summit; they'll back off.' But they didn't. They climbed right on into the night and summited and then started down...The Aussies pulled off the mountaineering coup of the century.¹⁴

Wickwire remarked, 'It was the most amazing thing I've ever seen.'¹⁵

As a postscript, the American team subsequently had difficulties with their North Ridge route. Only Phil Ershler, using artificial oxygen, reached the summit and only by ascending hand-over-hand the rope the Australians had left hanging down the 30 m steep section of rock in the Yellow Band. Presumably, Macartney-Snape had not told them the nature of the anchor!

13 'Australians on Everest', *Sydney Morning Herald*, November 1984, p. 8.

14 Krakauer, J. 1985, 'Return to the North Face', *Outside*, February, pp. 29–32.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 68.

Finally, how did the Australian climbers themselves react to their stunning success? Their reaction was not one of overt pride or self-congratulation, but rather one of relief and gratitude for having survived such a remarkable adventure in such beautiful surroundings. Hall's thoughts as he descended the last fixed ropes on the face and crossed the glacier were a moving and eloquent account of his feelings:

Despite my wish to hurry, my muscles did not have enough strength left for me to move quickly. I was content to go down slowly. There was time on the long abseils to think about our feat. We had done it, climbed a new route on Mt Everest without oxygen; a first, a real mountaineering coup. But of more importance in my mind was the thought that this was our last day on the mountain. No more painful load-carrying up the fixed ropes, no more cold feet and hands, no more worrying about the fickle mountain weather. From now on, back in Australia or away in the mountains, Mt Everest would never be the same. Gone was the air of mystery which had surrounded the mountain during our years of planning. Gone were the doubts of whether our small team was equal to the challenge. Gone was the fear that I might not return from the largest, most impersonal, but somehow most inviting graveyard of all...

[Back on the glacier] I removed my skis and walked down the slope to where the angle eased again. By then it was completely dark, and already the peaks of Lingren and Khumbutse were lit with moonlight. I remembered that today or tomorrow was the night of the full moon...I slid to a stop as I crested a small rise. The snow around me was rapidly losing its blackness. The distinct line between the mountain's shadow and the white light of the moon seemed to sweep towards me as I stared. I turned around in time to see the tip of the full moon rise directly over Everest's summit.

I could not believe my eyes, yet the unbelievable was definitely happening. The moon rose huge and bright over the apex of the mountain we had just climbed. The snow around me glistened as particles of ice threw the light up at me. The irritability which had been growing with my tiredness disappeared. How could anything be wrong in this most magnificent of settings? Awe filled my being, not with fear or insignificance, but with the warmth of belonging, of being a part of something so beautiful.

I turned around and skied along the well-lit slope. The moonrise could not have been better timed, nor could I have been better placed to appreciate it. The coincidence of those events left me feeling privileged, because I had survived the impersonal strength of the mountain, and had been given such a breathtakingly beautiful scene for my farewell. No longer did my weariness annoy me. The short rests I took every few minutes were not merely delays between me and the comfort of Camp I, but chances to admire the perfection of the night.¹⁶

Days later, as the Australian team bounced along the rough road away from base camp, Hall gave Everest a poignant farewell: "Though Qomolangma dominates the skyline it no longer rules our lives."¹⁷ (See image 12.4).

¹⁶ Hall, *White Limbo*, ch. 12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Everest aftermath

Tim Macartney-Snape

The moments following a big climb are the purest and sweetest of all. Months of anxiety, pain and discomfort are suddenly over; the monomania which possessed you at the expense of so many valuable thoughts evaporates and the senses it sharpened are let loose to experience the present without any restrictions.

My mind and body felt cleansed, peace was mine: my attention was at last completely free to see where I was. Khumbutse and Lingtren, those exquisite peaks of wind-sculpted ice, glowed against a multitude of stars. Venus shone like a miniature moon and the cusp of the Lhola greeted the Milky Way in a symbolic transition from earth to the stars.

There is an awesome feeling of power surrounding Qomolangma. I think you can sense it as you approach it from any direction, and that night the feeling was strong. The great valleys that drained the mountain came alive in my mind. From the valleys of the Khumbu I could smell juniper, azalea and the dank earth of the rhododendron forests—and Sherpa villages and monasteries so ingeniously and sympathetically suited to their surroundings; the miraculous peaks, Thamserku, Ama Dablam, Taweche, Kangtaiga—it all came clear in my mind. So did the sharply contrasting features of the valley below me. In the lower Rongbuk the earth's skeleton is exposed in all its colours, textures and patterns. During the day the air is so clear, the light so bright and the sky so dark that the rock-strewn landscape jumps up at you, vividly vibrant and alive. These and other images derive from something that is greater than the sum of its parts, something that really gives reverence to the Mother Goddess of the Earth.

From 'Mt Everest, the Australian ascent', *Wild*, no. 15 (Summer 1985), pp. 27–8.

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