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A colonel's dream

As their truck rumbled slowly away from the Rongbuk Valley and back towards the Tibetan settlements of Xegar and Xigatse, Tim Macartney-Snape, Lincoln Hall, Greg Mortimer, Andy Henderson and Geof Bartram no doubt felt a great sense of relief and release—relief, because the ever-present danger of climbing on a high Himalayan peak was over, and release, because the dominating influence of Mt Everest on their lives had finally waned. Although they were the first Australians to climb the mountain, they were not the first to experience the lure of Everest.

Earlier a small group of Australians had trekked up to Everest base camp from the south, from the Nepalese side of the mountain. It was February, the winter season, and as they sat on the little hillock called Kala Pattar, they could see the jet stream blow an enormous plume of cloud off the imposing rock pyramid. The view of Everest from Kala Pattar—the Khumbu Icefall, the South Col and the windblown summit itself—is one of the classics in Himalayan trekking. It is one that invariably leaves trekkers in a state of awe and often triggers dreams of climbing to the highest place on Earth.

For most, the dreams remain just that. For the leader of the Australian trekking group, however, the view from Kala Pattar spawned dreams that would launch and maintain an important strand of Australian mountaineering for more than a decade. The Australian trekkers were 17 members of the Australian Army, predominantly Royal Australian Engineers, and their leader was Colonel Peter Gration. Gration's dream, as he looked up at Everest's summit, was to put an Australian Army team on the top. He realised that it would have to be a long-term goal, as at that time the army had no significant pool of experienced mountaineers.

The year was 1975, the same year that the young members of the ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC) were starting to dream about their own Himalayan trip and the year that Warwick Deacock took the first Australian expedition into the Himalaya.

Gration, of course, had no knowledge of these events at the time, but he knew enough about Himalayan climbing to suggest that 1988, Australia's bicentennial year, would be an appropriate target date for an Australian Army ascent of Everest. In the intervening 13 years, the army could train enough mountaineers to make the goal feasible.

Gration's dream was the conceptual genesis of the 1988 Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE). The ABEE was by far the largest and most expensive Himalayan expedition ever to leave Australian shores and it required a massive organisational and fundraising effort involving many man-years of work. In the end, it brought together representatives of most of Australia's Himalayan climbing groups. Its members included mountaineers of extraordinarily diverse personalities, from the most individualistic, almost anarchic young civilian climbers to the most team-oriented, disciplined military mountaineers of the old school.

The ABEE brought Australia its second success on Mt Everest—a victory snatched at the last moment against all odds. The ascent was finally made by two exhausted climbers dangerously close to overstepping their limits on the agonising final stage up the South-East Ridge. One of the ascensionists had never been to the Himalaya before. In addition, the ABEE's climb was the first on Everest's traditional South Col route without the help of Sherpa support; it was virtually all done, including all of the exhausting load carrying, by the climbers themselves under their own steam.

The ABEE's ascent of Mt Everest was a bittersweet victory in many regards. The expedition was beset by deep-seated conflicts from the start: disagreements over the size and composition of the team, the style of leadership and the day-to-day conduct of the expedition—conflicts that stemmed from fundamental differences in perceptions of the Himalayan climbing experience itself. The disputes, building for years in the lead-up to the expedition, often flared into open conflicts in the pressure-cooker atmosphere of Everest itself. They left deep wounds on some climbers—a poignant counterpoint to the magnificence of the achievement.

The long and contorted saga of the ABEE was yet to unfold as Colonel Gration sat on Kala Pattar and gazed at Everest's summit. That story would be told over the next 13 years. His mind was on more immediate matters. Gration's first task was to begin to build the cadre of army climbers needed to tackle Everest, in essence to start one of the most significant strands that would be woven into the fabric of the ABEE.

When Gration returned to Australia after the 1975 trek, he set about revitalising the Army Alpine Association (AAA) as the vehicle for building an army climbing team. The AAA had existed for five years, but its original purpose was to promote alpine skiing. The club had lapsed significantly since its inception and was ripe for conversion to a mountaineering-oriented organisation.

Gration's interest in reviving the AAA was in more than just putting Australian Army personnel on the summit of Everest for the glory of it. He believed that the long process of building up the skills and experience needed to climb Everest would be valuable for the cadets at the Royal Military College, Duntroon, in Canberra, as an activity in its own right. He called it 'adventure training'.

'In a peacetime army, to develop and hone the skills we believe we need in war, you need some sort of activity that will stretch people physically and psychologically. To me, climbing is, by definition, that sort of activity. It also brings out the qualities of teamwork and leadership,' Gration argued.¹

Tim Macartney-Snape, although coming from a civilian background, reinforces Gration's beliefs:

The risks of injury or death during mountain-climbing are similar to the risks run by people in war zones. It [mountain-climbing] is going to a remote place and being put in the situation where you have to give your utmost...and that's what you're constantly having to do on a climb. The price for doing it wrong is very high, so you're really put in the situation where you have to perform, and it's very rewarding when you pull through.²

Gration's push to revitalise the AAA was the boost needed to get the group going from a nucleus that already existed at the Royal Military College (RMC). The RMC cadets, with their long-term commitment to the army and potential leadership skills, were the obvious choice for the source of future army mountaineers. The core of RMC personnel who had mountaineering experience included Major Paul Mench, Major Jake O'Donnell and Dr John Cashman, a lecturer in electrical engineering. All three attended a meeting in 1975 to revive the AAA, as did Warwick Deacock, who led the first Australian expedition to the Himalaya (Chapter 5).

Cashman was particularly keen to get a climbing club going. As a member of the Canberra Bushwalking Club, he had made frequent tramping/climbing trips to New Zealand. Also, in 1968 he had joined Robin Miller of the Canberra Bushwalking Club and Jake O'Donnell for a trek up the Kali Gandaki Gorge in central Nepal; the trio hooked onto a trip organised by Warwick Deacock. With that extensive mountain background, Cashman had tried since the mid-1960s to interest RMC cadets in forming a climbing club but had had little success.

In 1975, Cashman had, in one of his classes, two cadets who were enthusiastic climbers themselves and had been to New Zealand the year before. The pair, Jim Truscott and Lester Cornall, was most receptive to Cashman's suggestion that an RMC mountaineering club be formed. The 'magic bullet', however, according to Cashman, was Gration's backing of the AAA: 'Suddenly there was an enormous

1 P. Gration, Interview.

2 Hefner, R. 1987, 'Team set for assault on remote Himalayan peak', *The Canberra Times*, 18 October 1987, p. 8.

amount of interest amongst the cadets.³ As Truscott put it, ‘Colonels were like gods to us at RMC.’⁴ Although the RMC Mountaineering Club and the AAA were independent organisations, their active memberships were virtually identical and they operated essentially as one group.

The increase in enthusiasm and membership of the AAA quickly led to summertime trips to New Zealand, where the cadets took formalised mountaineering courses from companies such as Alpine Guides and then went out and climbed in the Southern Alps in small groups of their own. From very early on, the cadets established a reputation for being the most zealous of organisers. Although it would eventually pay off in the ABEE, their organisational drive was definitely overkill for a New Zealand trip, as Cashman remembered with some amusement:

Army people are incredible organisers. It is not at all to make life easier. It’s the goal itself. There’s a statement attributed to Bill Tilman—‘If you can’t organise the expedition on the back of an envelope, you shouldn’t be going.’ Tilman would have been horrified by the army trip to New Zealand. These guys were writing letters to the NZ Army organising accommodation, kombi vans, and all sorts of things. The vans were used to transport people who otherwise would have gone by bus with far less trouble and far less expense. They thought they were going to get it all scot-free. The NZ Army, in fact, someone who didn’t really have the authority, said that there may be some nominal charges that might be levied, but that the bills probably wouldn’t be presented. Well, the bills were presented. And how! People ended up paying a lot more money than they had ever imagined.⁵

The New Zealand trips gave the cadets just the sort of experiences they needed to survive and function effectively in big mountains (see images 13.1 and 13.2). There were falls in crevasses, midnight trips in fog up the Tasman Glacier, periods of weather-enforced inactivity in mountain huts, doses of steep and hard climbing and the magic moments—such as Peter Lambert’s recollection of climbing up a steep snow slope on a moonlit night with only the sounds of crampons crunching in the firm snow and carabiners gently clinking to break the silence—that kept mountaineers coming back to do it all again.

Some of the many cadets who climbed in New Zealand in the early years were later to play important roles in army mountaineering. These included, in addition to Truscott and Lambert, Zac Zaharias, Dave Simpson, Brian Agnew, Rick Moor, Phil Pitham and Terry McCullagh. In the best style of leadership, Peter Gration himself participated in one of the early New Zealand climbing trips and quickly got into the action. Gration accompanied Cashman on a sortie up the Tasman Glacier. The pair

3 J. Cashman, Interview.

4 J. Truscott, Interview.

5 J. Cashman, Interview.

was almost immediately holed up in de la Beche Hut by bad weather, whereupon, according to Cashman, 'Gration found out what mountaineering was all about—long periods without having a bath and not being able to see a blue sky'.⁶

The cadets' training was not confined to New Zealand. Some were avid rock climbers, as were many of the civilian mountaineers, and climbed on the local Australian crags. In addition, many made annual expeditions to the Snowy Mountains. These 'August epics', as they quickly became known, were valuable in giving the cadets winter experience in mountains (see images 13.3 and 13.4). As Jim Truscott pointed out, 'These "Epics" included ski mountaineering, building and living in snow caves, snow and ice climbing...August is notorious for bad weather and many of the August trips have become virtual survival exercises, providing a good psychological and physical introduction to mountaineering.'⁷

An important non-army person involved in these Snowy Mountains excursions was Fritz Schaumburg, manager of the Paddy Pallin outdoor shop in Canberra. Of all the people involved with the revitalisation of the AAA during the second half of the 1970s, Schaumburg was probably the most skilled and experienced mountaineer. Originally from Switzerland, he was raised in the Alps. He was skiing by the age of four and when he was thirteen climbed the Jungfrau, a formidable peak in the Bernese Oberland, with a retired guide. Later he lived in a ski resort but could not afford the cost of lift tickets, so he simply walked up the mountains and then skied down—four hours of climbing for a 15-minute run.

Schaumburg migrated to Australia in 1956. Four years later, he signed on as a ski instructor for six weeks in New Zealand, but remained there for four years and became a climbing guide at Mt Cook. During that time, he climbed nearly all of the 10 000 ft (3000 m) peaks in the Southern Alps and made some notable ascents, including the first ascent of the South Face of Mt Sefton and the second ascent of the East Face of Mt Tasman. He was obviously one of Australia's most experienced alpine climbers.

In the mid-1970s, as the AAA was being rejuvenated under Gration's influence, Schaumburg was asked to assist in the introductory mountaineering courses—the 'August epics'—in the Snowy Mountains. This he gladly did, leading an ice-climbing trip to Watsons Crags in 1977, and subsequently became, along with Cashman, Truscott and Cornall, a driving force in the early years of the reconstituted AAA.

So, during the period 1975–80, the AAA was rapidly building up a cadre of alpine climbers, introduced to the sport in the Snowy Mountains and toughened by several seasons in New Zealand. It was precisely during this period that the ANUMC, located just a few kilometres away at the other end of Lake Burley Griffin in

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Truscott, J. 1990, *Military mountaineering: a decade and a half of experience*, Unpublished ms.

Canberra, was itself building up steam for its historic expedition to Dunagiri in 1978. There was, however, little regular contact between the two clubs—with very few exceptions, they did not climb with each other, attend each other's meetings or even exchange newsletters. They operated almost independently of one another.

By 1979, plans for an AAA overseas climbing trip were under way. After earlier proposed trips to Punjak Jayawijaya (5039 m) in Irian Jaya and Mt Vinson (5139 m) in Antarctica fell through, the army climbers set their sights on the Himalaya. Their objective was Tirich Mir, the highest peak in the Hindu Kush region of Pakistan. At 7706 m, Tirich Mir is an exceedingly high peak for a first expedition to the Himalaya, but one, unlike Dunagiri, that has a straightforward route to the summit. Two events in June 1980, however, put an end to that proposed adventure as well. The first was the tragic death of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Mench, who was the highest-ranking experienced mountaineer in the AAA and had been the first choice as leader of the Tirich Mir expedition (but was not released from duties for that trip) and a potential leader for future expeditions. In a most bizarre accident in Lamington National Park in southern Queensland, Mench fell to his death from a lookout when a rock on which he was standing broke away.

The second was the withdrawal of approval by the army for the expedition on advice from the Department of Foreign Affairs. Soviet troops had just invaded Afghanistan and, as Tirich Mir was located only a few kilometres from the Pakistan–Afghanistan border, it was not thought prudent to have Australian troops so close to the border. This last-minute cancellation, three weeks before the team was set to leave Australia, was a particularly bitter blow as all of the planning and organisation had been done and members had secured time away from their units.

Not wanting to waste all of that effort, the team quickly set about finding an alternative objective. After an exchange of letters with Nepalese authorities, they obtained permission to attempt Ganesh IV in the pre-monsoon season of 1981. They had wanted Ganesh I, the highest peak of the range, but border sensitivities—this time between Nepal and China—again frustrated them. Ganesh IV, however, was a formidable enough objective for a group of very young climbers on their first trip to the Himalaya. A part of the range clearly visible from the city of Kathmandu, the mountain is 7102 m high and offers a number of challenging routes. The route of the Australian attempt was one of the less technically difficult but, in the event, was fatal.

The team that the AAA sent to Ganesh IV was pretty much the one originally set to attempt Tirich Mir. The core of the group were seven young climbers: Brian Agnew, Zac Zaharias, Jim Truscott, David Sloane, David Simpson, Robert Phillpot and Phil Pitham. All had several seasons of New Zealand mountaineering under their belts

and had taken part in numerous August epics. The strength of the team was greatly enhanced by the inclusion of John Cashman and Fritz Schaumburg, the two most experienced climbers in the AAA (see images 13.5 and 13.6).

The route the group had chosen on Ganesh IV demanded a large dose of experience and judgment. It was a long route that followed a contorted glacier for a while before gaining the East Ridge and then headed more straightforwardly to the summit. The glacier was formed by tier upon tier of ice cliffs linked by crevasse-riddled slopes, the only feasible lines of ascent being tortuous journeys into and out of crevasses and under rotting seracs.

From camp one at 5000 m to camp two at 5800 m, the route was particularly convoluted. Cashman's description of a segment of it is illuminating: 'It wormed under a teetering serac gutted by melt seepages, up a gully littered with fresh avalanche debris, out into the centre of the ice fall.'⁸ The location of camp two was critical, as it had to be somewhere in the icefall—an area they knew to be prone to frequent small avalanches. The site they eventually found, although a long way from camp one, was the best possible. It was on top of a broad ridge and tucked under ice cliffs; the combination should guide any avalanches to the sides or over the top. The campsite was, all agreed, 'as safe as houses'.⁹

Just as camp two was being stocked with supplies and readied for the push onto the East Ridge and then the summit, bad weather intervened. The snowstorm was unusually heavy and prolonged for mid-April—a full six weeks before the monsoon was due to arrive. The climbers retreated to base camp to wait out the storm and remained there for a few extra days to allow the newly fallen snow to consolidate. On 20 April, they returned to camp one and two days later carried supplies back up to camp two (see image 13.7). Truscott, Sloane, Simpson and Maila Pemba, the expedition's sirdar, remained to begin rebuilding camp two.

The trip from camp one to camp two was rather unnerving, as Cashman reported: 'We didn't like what we saw of the ice fall—there was fresh avalanche debris everywhere, the terrain was unrecognisable as that which we had explored a week earlier, the nasty gully had a new charge of detritus every time we passed through it.'¹⁰ At least they had sited the camp in a safe spot and had allowed several days for the snow to settle. They had done everything by the book. Ganesh IV, however, had not read the book.

8 Cashman, J. 1981, 'An excellent campsite', *AAA Newsletter*, no. 1/81 (August), pp. 4–7.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*

On the morning of 23 April, Cashman was back out on the glacier:

Zac and I went for a wander up the glacier, which came directly down toward Camp I. We had always gone into this crevasse and through these rotten seracs so Zac and I spent the morning trying to find a way directly up the glacier. We were back about lunchtime. The snow was getting soft and it wasn't much fun being out in the 'solar reflector'.

We were still roped up. Then there was this colossal noise. As it is with avalanches, the noise comes some time after the visible phenomena. It might even be that the visible part of it has disappeared by the time you hear about it. This time the sound was coming from an ominous direction so we looked straight up. In fact, this time we heard the noise before we saw it. It occurred a lot further up the mountain. When we heard it, it must have still been above the ice cliffs. Then suddenly it burst across the ice cliffs. It was an awful feeling knowing there were four people up there.

Aside from the human aspect, it was just an awesome physical phenomenon (see image 13.8). It was the closest I've ever been to an avalanche. We just stood there and looked at it.

Then I remembered stories from New Zealand where climbers had been so awe-struck by the wonderful appearance of an avalanche that they just watched and watched, and were eventually wiped out by it. I suddenly had this feeling—it's coming straight towards us. I began fumbling, trying to undo knots. Although the knot was a bowline, and I can do those in my sleep, I couldn't get it undone. So without taking the rope off, I ran behind a rock. It wouldn't have done me much good.

In the event the avalanche really didn't come very near us, but it completely clouded out the sky. Then an age seemed to go by. The avalanche was so big and so engulfing, I didn't really expect anyone to survive. Then, about an hour later, we saw a figure coming down. It was Maila Pemba.¹¹

Jim Truscott described what happened at camp two:

It had been a very windy night. Maila Pemba was up all night praying—it shook up the rest of us. The next morning, on the way up toward the camp three site, we crossed a lot of avalanche debris. We decided to retreat back to camp two.

I started digging a snow cave into the face of the ice cliff to make the camp more secure. Then I heard a roar like a train coming down the mountain. I stood up. A huge wall of snow was coming down at us. I shouted to the other blokes to get out of the tents. They stuck their heads out and then it hit.

11 J. Cashman, Interview and expedition diary.

I was engulfed. It was like being tossed around in surf—I tumbled over and over. It seemed like a very long time but it probably was only 10 or 15 seconds. Fortunately, most of it went over the top of us. I swam toward the top, then stood up and got to the top. I looked out and saw two guys further down. Maila was crying; he totally went to pieces. There was no sign of Dave Sloane—he had obviously been swept over a big icefall below us.

I was the only one with boots on; the others had just down booties or slippers. Both tents were swept away. We had no choice but to spend the night in a crevasse. I had to cut steps down into it for the others to get safely down. Maila wanted to go down, even without boots! I gave him my boots and sent him down with half a tent pole as a walking stick. We saw him fall a couple of times in the icefall and thought he was a goner.¹²

From Maila Pemba's garbled account, the climbers at camp one could not determine how many survivors there were and who they were. A rescue was immediately organised and by mid-afternoon Cashman was heading up the glacier again, this time accompanied by another of the Sherpa staff.

The weather had clagged in. Lots of thunder reverberated around, sounding much like avalanches. It was very frightening. We saw debris of the big one; we were ploughing through it up to our waists. It became very dangerous and the Sherpa was losing his nerve, so we turned back. It began to look like we would be throwing more lives after the first one[s].¹³

Another rescue was organised and at 1.30am, Zac Zaharias and Brian Agnew set out for camp two. It was still risky, as thunderstorms were rolling around and boulders were tumbling down from higher on the mountain. The pair pushed on and arrived at the camp two site just after daybreak.

'It was a very emotional time as we came over the top,' Agnew remembered. 'We were greeted by Dave Simpson and Jim Truscott, so we instantly knew that Dave Sloane had been swept to his death.'¹⁴

12 J. Truscott, Interview.

13 J. Cashman, Interview.

14 B. Agnew, Interview.

An excellent campsite

John Cashman

15 April 1981.

Two days ago the start of the route from Camp 1 to Camp 2 had been broken by Jim Truscott, Maila Pemba and Dave Sloane. It wormed under a teetering serac gutted by melt seepages, up a gully littered with fresh avalanche debris, out into the centre of the ice fall, from where the going became steep but straight forward. 'It gets less steep as you get higher, and there's no avalanche debris.' The gully is nasty. Some dangers are unavoidable. You get past them as quickly as snow, altitude and concentration permit. Tomorrow they will fix ropes to reduce gully time to a minimum.

Yesterday Maila Pemba, Temba, Dave Simpson and I pushed the route further. The climb was without incident except for extraordinary views of the Anku Khola shimmering in the haze, the village of Hingdung where our porters lived and back to the Kathmandu valley in the distance. Two myths exploded: it doesn't get less steep; and it's all avalanche debris. To unacclimatised red blood corpuscles climbing between 16,000 and 19,000 ft is hard work. Maila and Temba were 100 yards ahead of Dave and me—a distance which precluded discussion of anything. Every time they appeared on top of a rise we hoped they would drop their packs and declare Camp 1. Eventually when we stopped and yelled to them through the thin air they yielded, found a spot below some low ice cliffs and began digging a platform for the tents. By the time Dave and I shambled up they were nearly finished. The site was on a broad ridge, which should shed avalanches, and under some ice cliffs which should fire any falling debris over the top of the camp. The site was excellent, except that it seemed a long way from Camp 1.

After the site is established the ferrying of stores begins to stock the camp for habitation—several days of unskilled labour. Today's caravan—Jim Truscott, Dave Sloane, Maila and Temba—discharged its task without incident. I thought the distance was overlong. It would become easier when we were acclimatised, was Dave Sloane's opinion. 'It's an excellent camp-site.'

Dave Sloane and Jim Truscott have been working at Camp 1 for some days and now descended to base camp for a well earned rest. Others of us remained, intending to carry loads to Camp 2 tomorrow. This was not to be—a depression brought heavy snow falls; we decided after a couple of days to pack up the camp for its own protection. We retreated to base camp.

23 April

We returned to Camp 1 on the 20th and 21st and on the 22nd we set off at 3 am for Camp 2, some of us ferrying stores and four—Jim Truscott, Maila Pemba, Dave Sloane and Dave Simpson—to rebuild and man Camp 2. Camp 2 was half buried under the recently fallen snow, the tents collapsed with their ridge poles snapped. We the drones, dumped our loads, left the others in the terrible beauty of their eyrie, and slithered down to Camp 1. We didn't like what we saw of the ice fall—there was fresh avalanche debris everywhere, the terrain was unrecognisable as that which we had explored a week earlier, the nasty gully had a new charge of detritus every time we passed through it. We concluded that the ice fall needed a couple more days of sun and nights of frost to congeal the loose snow. The site of Camp 2 however, we were unanimous, on its ridge, under the ice cliffs, was as safe as houses.

In the afternoon more snow fell, more avalanche fodder. There should be no climbing in the ice fall until it stopped. Tomorrow will be a lay day, and perhaps too the day after. We calculated that Camp 2 could survive for a week, if necessary, without resupply.

That was yesterday. Today Zac Zaharias and I made a sortie into the lowest part of the ice fall and found a way to avoid the gully. Well pleased with ourselves, still roped together, we were bragging of our discovery to the others at Camp 1, when our story was lost in the seismic boom of a large avalanche. You hear lots of avalanche noises and there is sport in locating the snow plume before it falls out of sight. So we were staring at the head of the ice fall, at the ice cliffs which overhung it, above which we knew the tents of Camp 2 were huddled, above which seemed to be the source of this avalanche. Suddenly the line of ice cliffs exploded in powder snow. The face of the avalanche was a mile across. Millions of tons of snow and ice were sweeping across Camp 2. Three thousand feet below we felt the cold wind generated in the commotion above. Then the mountain became quiet. The sun was brilliant again. The sky was infinitely blue. It was 11:40 a.m.

After a while we heard a voice on the walkie-talkie. Someone had survived. Then we saw Maila Pemba at the head of the ice fall coming down. We watched his lonely figure for an hour before he reached us. They had lost all their equipment, he said, they cannot move without boots. Maila was shocked and his English was broken. Who 'they' were was not clear.

We started immediately with boots and sleeping bags but were defeated by a storm when we were only half way to the stranded survivors. The following morning a second party left Camp 1 at 1:30 a.m. and reached them about 6 a.m. They were back at 8 a.m. 'They' were Jim Truscott and Dave Simpson. Dave Sloane was dead.

When the avalanche hit them they were slouching about the camp, some in tents, some outside. Jim Truscott saw it first and shouted to those in the tents to get out. Afterwards when they dug themselves out, they were in different places to where they had been buried. The camp was smashed, gear was everywhere. They probed in the snow with tent poles but Dave Sloane was gone.

They had one pair of boots. They gave them to Maila, who was shocked and bruised the worst, and sent him down with the news. They found a shovel and dug a snow hole in which they spent the night. They made themselves comfortable in odds and ends which they had found—by one of life's ordinary bizzareries, much of it belonged to Dave Sloane—a sleeping bag, a duvet jacket, a pair of inner boots...When they were found next morning they were, physically, not the worse for wear, though later Dave Simpson was to have such painful feet that he had to be carried home on porters' backs.

28 April

Base camp had been struck. Just before we left we came together on the square of snow where Dave Sloane's tent had been and looked at the mountain for a few moments: Ganesh, the god with a human body and the head of an elephant, son of Shiva and Parvati.

From *AAA Newsletter*, no. 1/81 (August 1981), pp. 4–7.

The avalanche had taken not only Sloane but much of the equipment and supplies stashed at camp two. With the loss of that much gear in addition to the tremendous psychological blow of losing a colleague and close friend, there was no option but to abandon the expedition. It was a bitter blow to the AAA. After years of training in Australia and New Zealand and after the disappointment of having to cancel the Tirich Mir trip at the last minute, they had been struck with tragedy on their first Himalayan attempt.

At the end of 1981, the AAA was still a long way from being in a position to attempt Everest. Six years had passed since Peter Gration stood on Kala Pattar and dreamed of Australian soldiers climbing Everest; only seven years remained until the 1988 target date. Although a cadre of mountaineers had been built up in the AAA, their Himalayan experience was still very thin indeed.

Something positive, however, did come out of the Ganesh IV experience. Four of the climbers would eventually go on to play important roles in the ABEE. For them, the experiences on Ganesh IV were undoubtedly a thorough and harsh introduction to the realities of Himalayan climbing. Two of the climbers—Jim Truscott and Zac Zaharias—were destined to become intense adversaries in the planning and organisation of the ABEE and would become involved in a sometimes bitter dispute that persisted during and after the expedition itself.

Truscott was unique among the cadets who formed the original core of AAA Himalayan climbers. Originally from near Brisbane, he was the only one who had become involved in climbing before the Gration-led push revitalised the AAA. Truscott was rock climbing at the age of fifteen on crags around southern Queensland and climbed with members of the Brisbane Rockclimbing Club. In 1974, a year before Gration's trek, he went to New Zealand and participated in an Alpine Guides' course.

When the RMC Mountaineering Club was formed in 1975 and the AAA reconstituted, Truscott was in on the ground floor. An intense man of few words, he was an organisational driving force in many early AAA adventures and always did much to ensure that expeditions ran smoothly and efficiently. In addition, Truscott was a member of the Special Air Service (SAS) during the Ganesh IV expedition and, on his return to Perth, he promoted AAA activities there (see Chapter 14).

Zaharias, on the other hand, had done very little climbing, and none on rock, when he went with an AAA group to New Zealand at the end of 1976. What inspired him?

I had been in Scouts and done some bushwalking. Then I read Chris Bonington's book on the South-West Face of Everest. That really inspired me, particularly the photographs. They were so appealing. Then I went to a AAA meeting in early 1976 and decided to give it a go. I was off to New Zealand at the end of the year.¹⁵

The Alpine Guides' basic mountaineering course came as somewhat of a shock to Zaharias: 'I bit off more than I could chew. After the course, I decided to pack up my gear and go home. Then John Cashman invited me to come up the Tasman Glacier with him. It was the best thing I could have done—I learned a lot from him.'¹⁶ Just as Lincoln Hall had been equivocal about his first alpine climbing trip and decided to give it a second try, Zaharias had second thoughts about continuing in mountaineering after his first experience. He persevered, however, and eventually became one of the leaders in the AAA climbing team.

The third Ganesh IV climber who would play important roles in future AAA climbs was Brian Agnew. Like Zaharias, Agnew had no background in rock climbing when he joined the 1976 instructional trip to New Zealand. And, like others, he had his 'fair dose of Bonington'¹⁷ to get him interested in mountaineering initially.

15 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

16 Ibid.

17 B. Agnew, Interview.

During that first trip to New Zealand, Agnew teamed with Peter Lambert to climb a small peak in the Mt Cook region. During the ascent, Lambert remarked, 'Just imagine we're struggling with a load up to the South Col.'¹⁸ Twelve years later, the pair would be in a camp on the icy Lhotse Face preparing to do just that.

Of those four Ganesh IV members who continued as active climbers into the late 1980s, only Phil Pitham came from outside the AAA framework of August epics and New Zealand instructional trips. Like Truscott, originally from Queensland, Pitham was a very active athlete in high school, reaching state level in competitive swimming, athletics and cycling. Meanwhile, he drifted into bushwalking at the age of fourteen or fifteen and soon was 'walking' up terrain so steep that he was advised by others to start using a rope or he would kill himself. He quickly mastered rope techniques and soon was a regular at Frog Buttress, a popular crag south-west of Brisbane.

Pitham was also inspired by some of Bonington's mountaineering books so decided to give alpine climbing a go. He went to New Zealand during the 1976–77 summer—the same time that Zaharias, Lambert and Agnew made their first trip to the Southern Alps. Pitham, however, was independent of the AAA. He teamed with a Brisbane rock climber, a 'local tiger', who, Pitham recalled, 'freaked out on our first climb, so I left him and went to the top alone'.¹⁹

Turning in his hired gear, Pitham bought his own crampons and ice axe, took a basic mountaineering course and then joined a visiting Scottish climber to knock off a phenomenal 26 summits in an eight-week orgy of climbing. He joined the army in 1979 and quickly found his way to the AAA.

Although not a member of the Ganesh IV expedition, Peter Lambert was another of the early members of the AAA who was to play a prominent role in the development of the club through the 1980s and in the ABEE. His love for the mountains was sparked at the age of fifteen by a Bonington book, *The South Face of Annapurna*. Hanging around the Sydney Rockclimbing Club's pub in The Rocks did not quite fulfil the yearning for high mountain adventure that Bonington books inspired, and it was not until Lambert entered the RMC in 1976 and joined the recently revitalised AAA that his thirst for the hills began to be satisfied. He was certainly one of the AAA's most active members. He took part in the August epics and climbed in New Zealand every year from 1976 to 1980.

Lambert also learned firsthand early in his career of the dangers of mountaineering. While participating in a Geoff Wyatt advanced ice-climbing course in December 1981 in the Mt Aspiring region of New Zealand, Lambert watched helplessly as his rope-mate and best friend, Rick Butler, was killed by a falling rock dislodged by

18 P. Lambert, Interview.

19 P. Pitham, Interview.

another climber. Ironically, Dave Simpson, who witnessed the death of Dave Sloane the year before on Ganesh IV, was also present. Simpson gave up climbing shortly thereafter, likely because of the death of two friends in two years.

Unlikely source

The focus of early AAA climbing activity was the RMC Mountaineering Club based in Duntroon, Canberra, and it was essentially that club that sent Truscott, Zaharias, Agnew, Pitham and the others to Ganesh IV. There was, however, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, another branch of the AAA. It was located in Perth—only marginally more likely as a source of mountaineers than places such as Darwin or Alice Springs. Its leader was a man who combined an almost superhuman desire to succeed and a love/hate relationship with the mountains—in short, the most enigmatic character ever to appear on the Australian Himalayan climbing scene.

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