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Ordered to climb

Most climbers find their way into the sport through a love of mountains, the lure of a personal challenge or the enjoyment of the gymnastic skills needed to master movement on steep terrain. They start with perhaps some family camping trips, bushwalking with school or outdoor groups or scrambling on steep rocks with a few friends. Then, with some inspiration from local climbers or Bonington mountaineering books, they move on to technical rock climbing and alpine climbing.

Pat Cullinan's entry into mountaineering, on the other hand, was the most unusual of any of Australia's Himalayan climbers. He was, almost literally, ordered to climb.

A member of the Special Air Service (SAS), Cullinan was sent to Perth and made 'Climbing Troop Commander'. The members of each SAS unit, in addition to mastering all of the usual military skills, must learn a 'specialist skill', and in the case of Cullinan's troop, climbing was that skill. The year of Cullinan's posting was 1975—that critical year during which so much of Australian Himalayan climbing had its start.

Although Cullinan had done no climbing before he was assigned to the Perth SAS unit, he was not uninitiated in outdoor pursuits. Before his move to Perth, he had done some bushwalking in the Snowy Mountains region of New South Wales and in 1976 made the classic trek to Everest base camp.

Cullinan's climbing career began in the course of duty, with rock-climbing instruction at Mt Arapiles in western Victoria followed with excursions to the crags of the Stirling Range south-east of Perth. By the late 1970s, Cullinan thought his SAS troops, to fully develop their skills as climbing specialists, needed a more challenging objective further afield.

The next advance for most Australian climbers at this stage of their careers is a trip to New Zealand, where they take an introductory course in alpine climbing and then hone their new skills on some of the more straightforward mountains in the Southern Alps. A few do go directly to the Himalaya without New Zealand experience under their belts, but they invariably confine a first trip to one of the lower, less-demanding of the 'trekking peaks' or an equivalent.

Cullinan, however, had something vastly different in mind for his troops. He not only bypassed New Zealand, he led them in 1980 straight to Nepal—in fact, to a high, unclimbed, difficult Himalayan peak. Their mountain was Gauri Shankar, an impressive peak rising precipitously from the remote Rolwaling Valley in eastern Nepal. At 7150 m, it is slightly higher than Dunagiri—the objective of the ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC) expedition two years earlier—and is even more difficult technically. In fact, only the northern summit of Gauri Shankar's complex upper structure had been climbed, and that by a strong and experienced American team in 1979. Cullinan's audacious plan was to climb to the main southern summit via the 5 km-long South-East Ridge, replete with ice towers, rock gendarmes and double cornices—in short, a climbing nightmare. In attempting this route to an unclimbed Himalayan summit more than 7000 m high, the group of raw climbing recruits from hot, flat Western Australia was very much out of their depth.

Cullinan and his colleagues quickly realised that they did not have the experience, skill, time or equipment to climb Gauri Shankar. Their planned approach to the South-East Ridge would, however, take them near a subsidiary summit, Tseringma. At 6333 m, Tseringma offered some interesting climbing and, as it was an unclimbed summit, was a particularly attractive target for a team on their first expedition to the Himalaya.

The early part of the expedition went smoothly as the group set up a series of three camps up snow ramps and a gully to within striking distance of the summit. Then the realities of Himalayan climbing began to slow the drive to the top, as Cullinan reported.

In a short period of time a number of things happened. Firstly, the youngest expedition member, Jim MacDonald [twenty], failed to acclimatise and returned to Australia. Secondly, a fierce, consistent snow storm of 48 hours duration made the gully a death trap. It buried Paul Richards and [staff member] Shambu Tamang for 24 hours at Camp 3. They survived by cutting a hole in the top of the tent and forcing the windshield from the MSR stove through the top as an airway. The storm damaged both high camps and base camp, collapsing the kitchen and forcing everyone off the mountain. Thirdly, the tragic news of three Australians killed in an avalanche on Annapurna III from the same storm reached the expedition on 1 April and cast a cloud of gloom over all.

We were running out of time. The weather had not let up. We had taken a wrong fork in the gully above Camp 3 and had to re-route the fixed lines. We were experiencing difficulty in finding a suitable site for another camp. The gully was in a continual state of avalanche due to continually heavy snow falls, making movement on the mountain very dangerous. There had been a few near misses but then at 1.40 p.m. on 3 April it happened.

First a yell, and then the two lead climbers saw Barry Young literally disappear into a cloud below. Barry, after detaching himself from the safety rope, had tripped and fallen down the gully, which descends some 5,000 feet over an ice cliff into an icefall below. The two lead climbers, Mick Hardless and Wayne Carroll, immediately headed down to Camp 3 at 18,600 feet, where they saw Sherpa Anu. Mick yelled out to Anu, 'Barry's dead!' Anu replied, 'No he's not. He's in the tent.' It was unbelievable but true. The one-in-a-million chance had happened. Anu was just about to climb into his tent when he saw a pack fly past out of the surrounding mist. He knew it was possible a climber could be falling the same way. Still tied to the safety rope by his waist band, he quickly moved into the gully and, with both arms, grabbed Barry as he came past, and so saved his life. Barry had just fallen over 1,200 feet and lived. His pack went on for another 3,500 feet and over an ice cliff. It was a miracle.¹

Despite Young's close call, the other climbers pushed on and the next day Mick Hardless and Wayne Carroll established camp four at nearly 6000 m. There still remained some difficult technical climbing just below the summit. Richards overcame a vertical ice pitch and, on 11 April, he, Graham Brammer and Shambu Tamang reached the summit. Two days later, Cullinan, Hardless, Carroll and John Remyense matched their accomplishment.

The climb was the first ascent of Tseringma and left Cullinan happy with his team's performance:

We didn't get to the top of Gauri Shankar as we had initially planned, however we returned to Australia satisfied. We had pioneered a new route at least part way up one of the world's most technically difficult and serious mountains. We were generally happy with our overall performance, especially considering none of us had ever done any Himalayan climbing before.²

The 1980 Gauri Shankar expedition was the first official Australian expedition in Nepal. It was carried out under the auspices of the AAA and under the patronage of Peter Gratton, by then Major General Gratton, OBE. The venture was, however, conceived and conducted entirely by Cullinan and his SAS unit in Perth with no operational links with the main body of AAA climbers based in Canberra. The expedition would have become simply a curious sideshow to the main AAA

1 Cullinan, P. and Brammer, G. 1980, *Report on the first ascent of Tseringma Peak*, Report no. 852/1/1, 23 October 1980, Australian Army Alpine Association, Canberra.

2 Ibid.

climbing program building towards Everest had it not been for the involvement of Cullinan, the only member of the 10-man Gauri Shankar team to return to the Himalaya.

The Gauri Shankar attempt was perhaps typical of Cullinan's approach to mountaineering in the Himalaya. It was an extraordinarily ambitious project, one that he and his team had no real chance of completing, yet they acquitted themselves remarkably well and pulled off a significant first ascent in the process. Their feat was saluted by Harish Kapadia, editor of the *Himalayan Journal*, as one of the best climbs in the Himalaya in 1980.³

Cullinan would later take on challenges every bit as daunting as the Gauri Shankar task and pull them off with an unwavering determination that left even his own team-mates amazed and perplexed. He was, without doubt, the most puzzling of the many pieces that made up the complex ABEE mosaic.

His next trip to the Himalaya did not come until 1986, but Cullinan continued to develop his alpine climbing skills in the interim. In 1982, while posted in Africa on a peacekeeping mission, he climbed Mt Kilimanjaro, the continent's highest mountain, and ascended Victoria Emanuel (5030 m) in the little-visited Ruwenzori Range in Uganda. The latter involved 600 m of ice climbing near the summit. Three years later, he was in New Zealand's Southern Alps on one of Geoff Wyatt's advanced ice-climbing courses, during which he did a number of long traverses in the Mt Aspiring region.

Meanwhile, the main body of AAA climbers in the eastern states was regrouping after the tragedy on Ganesh IV in 1981. Their next objective, Denali (Mt McKinley) in Alaska, was less ambitious than Ganesh IV but perhaps more appropriate for a group of mountaineers still in the early stages of their high-altitude climbing careers.

Although not in the Himalaya, Denali is a mountain of Himalayan proportions. It is 6194 m high, but since it is only 300 km south of the Arctic Circle, the somewhat reduced atmospheric pressure means that the mountain is effectively a few hundred metres higher. Furthermore, temperatures of -40 degrees Celsius and wind speeds of up to 160 km/hour are not uncommon during the summer season—conditions experienced on only the highest of Himalayan summits.

The seven-man expedition, organised by Peter Lambert and led by Zac Zaharias, chose the West Buttress route, a route first climbed in 1951 and considered to be one of the safer and easier routes on the mountain. It turned out to be a wise choice as the 1982 summer season in Alaska was not blessed with particularly good weather. Of the 21 days the AAA team spent on Denali, only three were fine.

3 Kapadia, H. 1980, 'Editorial', *Himalayan Journal*, vol. 37, p. 1.

The climb was done alpine style. Five camps were established above a base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier and on 12 June, Zaharias, Lambert, Phil Pitham and Tony Delaney reached the summit (see images 14.1 and 14.2). Denali lived up to its reputation as one of the harshest places on the planet. On the summit day, a relatively fine one, the temperature was -35°C and 50 km/h winds buffeted the top of the mountain.

Getting to the summit of Denali was just as dramatic and exciting as topping out on a much higher Himalayan peak, as Lambert recalled:

As we climbed the summit slopes some of us began to hallucinate—‘red snow with yellow edges? Impossible. Breathe deeply and maybe it will go away.’ Our progress slowed as we approached the summit ridge and we cached our packs, moving on with axes only. When we reached the ridge we found a narrow and windy ridge leading about 300 m to the summit. It was magnificent.

On the left the slopes dropped away into the crevassed Harper Glacier to be finally cradled by the black rock buttresses of the North Peak. To the right the South Face dropped 9,000 feet into the East forks of the Kahiltna Glacier. Stunning ice gullies disappeared into the void below, enclosed by ice ridges adorned with twisted and wind-blown cornices. We moved slowly along and up the ridge to the summit. An elongated snow mound twenty thousand three hundred and twenty feet above sea level...we were on top of North America.⁴

During the ascent, Denali continued to provide a stern test of altitude and severe conditions. Two climbers, Dave Smith and Joe Lorincz, were forced to turn back at 5200 m; Smith was suffering from pulmonary oedema and Lorincz from cerebral oedema. On the summit day, Bernie McGee was forced to retreat at 5800 m as he was hallucinating.

The Denali success was a great morale booster for the AAA. The expedition was carried out most competently, in planning and execution, and it was at least partial compensation for the disappointment of the Ganesh IV experience, particularly for Zaharias and Pitham. Most importantly, it was a big step in the right direction for Everest—success on a formidable 6000 m mountain under harsh conditions.

Zaharias and Pitham were not the only Ganesh IV members back in the big mountains in 1982. Brian Agnew, the climbing leader of the Ganesh IV expedition, joined a large British Army trip officially named the ‘West Nepal Expedition 1982’. The primary objective was Peak 29, also known as Manaslu South or Dakura, a difficult 7837 m peak just east of the Annapurna Himal. Peak 29 had been climbed previously by a Japanese expedition that had, according to Agnew, ‘used 30 men in a wedge to plough their way to the summit’.⁵

4 P. Lambert quoted in Zaharias, Z. 1982, *Mt McKinley expedition report*, Report no. MCK/66, Australian Army Alpine Association, Canberra.

5 B. Agnew, Interview.

The reason for Agnew's participation in the Peak 29 expedition was to learn more leadership skills and broaden his Himalayan experience generally. The British Army had by the early 1980s already run a number of successful Himalayan expeditions, so, at least in theory, it would be able to provide valuable instruction to Australian Army climbers, who were relative newcomers to the game.

In practice, however, Agnew had managed to latch on to a very early expedition of the second generation of British Army mountaineers who were even lower on the learning curve than their AAA counterparts. In addition, there were no members on the trip from the older, more experienced generation of British Army climbers; everything would have to be learned from the very start. Agnew described the result as 'an unmitigated failure from day one'.⁶

The debacle began in Kathmandu, where the British climbers landed without their equipment; it was stuck on a ship in Bombay (Mumbai). More disasters followed. They somehow managed to take the wrong approach march and ended up on the wrong side of the mountain. The trek route mistake was compounded by a massive brawl with local villagers on the way. When they finally did get to Peak 29, they were confronted with a forbidding 5 km-long ridge followed by a steep face climb. Faced with these difficulties, one of the British climbers feigned illness and went home, the leader had to be coaxed up to camp one for a fleeting visit and the two best climbers—the 'guns' of the expedition—spent the trip in their tents pumping weights.

Agnew and Merv Middleton, one of the few British climbers not daunted by the mountain, did much of the lead climbing along the ridge. The high point reached was only 6000 m, as they were often forced to wade through shoulder-deep snow. After eight consecutive days of that, they ran out of steam.

The Peak 29 expedition turned out to be quite an experience for Agnew. He certainly learned a lot about expedition leadership from the British Army team, but much in the same way that one learns forensic skills by watching Inspector Clouseau bumble his way through a *Pink Panther* movie.

6 Ibid.

The British Army West Nepal expedition in 1982: how *not* to organise an expedition

Brian Agnew

Day One and I meet the guys in Kathmandu. Day Two and they break the news to me that they have no equipment. It's still on the ship in Bombay. Here we are—great British Army organisation; some of these guys had just come from the Falklands War—and they had no gear. Luckily I had brought my own equipment. I was the only one with an ice axe.

They then proceeded to strip the bazaars of Kathmandu. They had unbelievable sums of money as they had sent a message home and the British Army Climbing Association gave them a complete new issue of kit! But they had no idea of just what they needed and how to get it. Organisationally we bumbled our way through Kathmandu.

Even in finding their way to the end of the road at Trisuli Bazaar they were hopeless. They had no idea of where to hire porters or where to go. I didn't want to come to the fore too early in the expedition, but I had been to Trisuli Bazaar 12 months earlier as leader of the Ganesh IV expedition. I could have said, 'We did this, this, and this,' and set them straight. But I didn't want to be the Australian know-it-all, so I kept waiting for their 'experts' to come forward.

We finally did arrange porters, but we had a porter strike on the walk in. This is apparently traditional on the walk in to Manaslu. There is always trouble at a particular village, so the authorities put a police post there. The 'baddies' just moved up to the next village, which we had to go through anyway. We came into that village with the lowland porters we had contracted. The porters were all shuffled into a courtyard in the centre of the village by the locals, who were drugged to the eyeballs on marijuana. They let the members go through, as they didn't really want to stop us, but we soon realised our porters weren't getting through so we doubled back. There were all our porters cowering in the courtyard. They had been rounded up by a group of big Tibetans.

We had a massive argument. In fact, we came to blows with these big Tibetans; blood was drawn on both sides. We had planned to take the lowland porters all the way to Base Camp, but after the fisticuffs we realised that if we didn't hire these Tibetans, we wouldn't be able to take anything out of the village. We quickly learned that in porter strikes, they have the upper hand.

It transpired that the Tibetans were terrific porters. Most carried triple loads (about 75 kg) and one even carried five loads, a monstrous load! We eventually became very good friends with them, as they were just below Base Camp in their summer pastures.

The porter problems were bad enough, but they weren't the end. Our next great disaster is that we took the wrong route in. Instead of going in the easy way around to the rear of the mountain and going at it from there, we took the frontal approach. We were faced with this horrendous ridge for five kilometres followed by a steep face climb!

Confronted with this situation, our leader and some of the members just couldn't cope. In an Australian Army expedition, the senior man is boss; it is very hierarchical. But the Brits do things differently. They put an NCO [non-commissioned officer] in charge if he's the most experienced climber; in theory he could be leading officers. In fact, that's just what happened in our expedition. But our leader, an NCO, just didn't have the fortitude to face the Himalaya. He was at home in the European Alps but was totally daunted by the Himalaya. He never got above Camp I; he was totally in awe of it all.

Many of the other members weren't much better. One of them went home early, feigning illness. We had two world-class rockclimbers, a couple of climbing instructors, and others who had taken mountaineering courses. All were 'experts' in some phase of climbing, but when it came to the Himalaya, they were daunted. Even the two world-class climbers couldn't cope. They stayed in their tents for the duration of the trip and pumped weights.

So Merv Middleton, a good SAS bloke who was keen to have a go at it, and I were sent out in front to do the climbing. We got Camp I in but not without a few dramas. One of these supposed experts—he'd represented Great Britain in the Olympics in canoeing—was also a mountaineer and a physical education instructor in school, an all-around great athlete. But he'd lost a kidney in one of his trips. We had a bad night with him. He and his partner were in one of the tents at Camp I, and Merv and I were in the other. We quickly realised he was in a very bad way, really knocked up. We put him on oxygen and gave him everything we had. We said, 'See you in the morning', and crawled back into the tent, but we didn't expect to see him alive the next morning.

Somehow he survived the night. We took him back down to Base Camp. It was quite a heroic trip on Merv's part as we had to go through an avalanche-prone basin while it was snowing heavily. We flipped a coin as to who would take him across and Merv lost—no use risking two lives. Just as Merv went across, his footprints created the 'zipper' for the whole slope to go. It cleaned the basin right out. Luckily, Merv rolled the right way—out of the avalanche—and dragged the other bloke with him. Merv got up, shook himself off, and continued.

From Camp I to Camp II the route was horrendous. Merv and I spent eight days up there pushing the route out to Camp II with no help from down below. We could do only 200 or so metres a day. Merv would find the route and I'd carry the ropes. We'd often sink into the deep snow up to our shoulders; we were continually pulling ourselves out of the snow.

Suffice it to say we didn't get very far along that ridge. The expedition was a dead loss, one that you just chalk up to a negative experience. Fortunately, I had work commitments so I had a good reason to leave the trip early.

I literally ran back out in three days. I hired an 18-year-old Tibetan and a 12-year-old boy to get my gear out. The lads were just great. We stopped the night in their village on the way out and they gave me dinner at their house. Unfortunately I became violently ill during the meal, walked over to the balcony, and vomited. It was a sign of things to come.

I got back to Kathmandu at 7.00 a.m. on the morning my flight was due to leave, and discovered that I was locked out of my hotel. I had heard that Fritz Schaumburg was in town, went across to his hotel, banged on his door, had a quick shower, and just made the plane.

Back in Australia I discovered that my sudden illness in the Tibetan village was the onset of amoebic dysentery. The reason I had to leave the expedition early was that I was doing a course at Puckapunyal, just outside of Melbourne. Every morning I drove flat out along the road—I had an RX-7 in those days—and then suddenly came to a screaming halt. All the people I had just overtaken would stare at me in amazement as I'd race out into the fields and drop my strides. Another ten kilometres and I'd race out and drop the strides again. This went on for some 18 days, a legacy of that disastrous trip to Peak 29.

So 1982 closed on a much brighter note for the AAA than did the previous year. A 6000 m mountain had been climbed and Brian Agnew had acquitted himself well on the British expedition. At least a good start had been made on the program of preparatory climbs for the Everest attempt in 1988. A big hurdle, however, remained: getting permission from the Nepalese authorities to climb the mountain.

The problem of booking a confirmed route on Everest became urgent by early 1983. The goal of climbing the world's highest mountain in 1988 was widely advertised within the AAA in 1981 and a carefully planned series of lead-up climbs had been organised, beginning with the Denali trip. Pat Cullinan, who was stationed in Africa for six months beginning in September 1982, returned to Australia via Nepal and was asked by General Gratton to secure a booking for Everest.

Cullinan's stopover put the application process in train and by late 1983 the AAA had its official booking for Everest. The approved route, however, was the West Ridge, which was more difficult than the South Col route they had originally wanted. The problem was that the South Col route had already been booked in 1980 by another group and was therefore unavailable. The AAA had been beaten to the punch and ironically it was by another group of Australian climbers.

A group of *Australians* booking Mt Everest in 1980? Who were they? Where did they come from? And why were they so confident that they booked Everest even before Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall began thinking about climbing it?

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.