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By the book

Every country has its sporting heroes and Australia probably has more than most, given the prominence of sport in our culture and the proliferation of football codes by geographical region. Greg Norman, Shane Warne, Ian Thorpe and Cathy Freeman are all household names, and even many Victorians would know who Stirling Mortlock is. Mention Greg Mortimer, however, and you would be very lucky to find one in 1000 Australians who have the faintest notion of what he has done. Mortimer, it turns out, is the first Australian to have climbed both Mt Everest and K2, the world's two highest mountains.

Himalayan mountaineering, although one of the most physically and mentally demanding activities ever devised by humans, is also one of the least known to the general public. Its heroes are recognised mainly by hardcore devotees who read specialist magazines and its achievements are rarely reported in the electronic media or in the popular press.

If there is one mountaineer who has broken out of this obscurity to become a well-known public personality—at least in the English-speaking world—it would have to be Chris Bonington. A professional climber for more than 30 years, Bonington has been on nearly 20 Himalayan expeditions and the list of those with whom he has climbed is a virtual who's who of British climbing. He has scaled sea-stacks on live television, filmed a historic ascent of the infamous North Wall of the Eiger and, through television documentaries, has brought Himalayan expeditions into the living rooms of homes around the world.

It is primarily his writing, however, that has propelled Bonington into the limelight and has inspired numerous aspiring mountaineers, including several of the Australian Army Alpine Association (AAA) members, to journey to the Himalaya. One of the earliest and most influential of his expedition books is his account of the ascent of Annapurna I's South Face in 1970, a landmark climb that ushered in an era of

big-wall climbing in the Himalaya. The story and photos of that expedition proved an irresistible attraction to high-altitude mountaineering for countless British climbers—and for at least one Australian.

In 1972, Michael Rheinberger, an electrical engineer working in Melbourne for the predecessor of Telstra, won a two-year scholarship to study in Britain. There, a friend loaned him a mountaineering book: Chris Bonington's account of the 1970 Annapurna expedition. Rheinberger read it avidly and was, as he later put it, 'very captivated by it';¹ thus was born the career of one of Australia's most successful Himalayan climbers and a key member of the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE).

On returning to Australia after his stay in Britain, Rheinberger enrolled in a rock-climbing course run by the Victorian Climbing Club—his first taste of the experience of climbing itself. He was thirty-five years old at the time. During the 1976–77 summer season, he made his first climbing trip to New Zealand's Southern Alps and by the end of the decade, had helped organise and run the first expedition from the Melbourne climbing community to the Himalaya. During the 1980s, he was one of Australia's most prolific Himalayan mountaineers, taking part in nine expeditions to the great ranges of Asia.

Although Rheinberger was closely associated with Melbourne climbing, he was not originally a Victorian. Born in the NSW South Coast town of Bega, he received part of his secondary schooling there before moving to a boarding college in Goulburn, a rural community on the NSW Southern Tablelands, when he was fourteen. After finishing high school there, he went to the University of New South Wales in Sydney and graduated in 1961 with a degree in electrical engineering. Six years later, after two years' professional experience in (then) West Germany, he settled in Melbourne and worked until 1988 for Telecom and its successor, Telstra.

The southern section of the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) was formed just before Rheinberger became actively involved in mountaineering in the late 1970s, but the roots of Melbourne's alpine climbing community went back much further than that—back nearly to the days of World War II. About 1945, a mountaineering club was established at the University of Melbourne by Professor Tom Cherry, an Englishman who set up the club along the lines of the traditional British university mountaineering clubs.

Members of the Melbourne University Mountaineering Club (MUMC) were the pioneers of climbing in the Melbourne area from the 1940s until the 1960s. They gave instructional courses in alpine-climbing techniques at Mt Feathertop, where they built a hut, and provided advice for those going to New Zealand. They organised trips further afield—to the European Alps and to Antarctica, for

1 M. Rheinberger, Interview.

example. The MUMC, however, unlike its counterpart at The Australian National University in Canberra, never got around to organising an expedition to the Himalaya.

By the late 1960s, the character of the MUMC had changed. Many of those interested in alpine climbing had become involved in the Australian section of the NZAC and for a while the MUMC and NZAC ran parallel instructional courses. Eventually, the NZAC became the dominant focus for overseas climbing among Melbourne's mountaineering community.

In 1969, a group of Melbourne climbers, with assistance from the NZAC and the Mt Everest Foundation, organised a trip to the Andes Mountains of South America; it was the first major overseas expedition from Victoria and a precursor to its first Himalayan expedition 10 years later. The party, led by Ross Wyborn, included John Retchford, active for years in the MUMC and one of the early pillars of Melbourne climbing; Dot Butler, the driving force behind the establishment of the Australian section of the NZAC (see Chapter 4) and a link to the Sydney climbing community; and Jack Higgs, a member of the ill-fated expedition to Annapurna III in 1980.

By the 1970s, the MUMC had competition from another quarter. The Victorian Climbing Club (VCC) was rapidly gaining strength, coincidentally with the rapid rise in popularity of rock climbing. Mt Arapiles in western Victoria had become the centre of Australian rock climbing and the VCC was the preferred organisation for the growing army of hot, young rock climbers.

The NZAC group continued to gain strength during the decade as well. There was enough interest that by the mid-1970s, former New Zealander Rob Mitchell officially guided the southern section of the NZAC into existence. During this period, the MUMC by no means faded away but continued to spawn a large number of lean, fit bushwalkers, rock climbers and mountaineers. Towards the end of the 1970s, therefore, the Melbourne climbing community was thriving—ready for the inspiration and organisational drive needed to mount a Himalayan expedition.

It was during this period that Michael Rheinberger, infused with a bit of the Bonington magic, returned to Melbourne from his study leave in Britain. He quickly found his way to the NZAC, then a very active club centred on a core group that included Mitchell, Retchford, Pat Miller, Tony Crapper, Greg Martin, Andrew Rothfield, Anton Halibut, Nick Reeves and Mike Feller.

Rheinberger's arrival on the scene was half the spark needed to ignite a Himalayan trip. The other half was provided by Peter Allen, a soft-spoken town planner who became actively involved in the NZAC about the same time as Rheinberger. That pair, along with Rothfield, got the first Melbourne-based expedition to the Himalaya off the ground—organised for 1979 under the auspices of the southern Australian section of the NZAC.

The expedition was, as many were, ‘dreamed up in the pub one night’,² according to Rothfield, but it did get some impetus also from the ANU Mountaineering Club’s (ANUMC) well-publicised trip to Dunagiri. If a group of university students from Canberra could mount an expedition to a major Himalayan peak, why couldn’t a group of Melbourne alpine climbers do likewise? It was a good example of the effect of the Dunagiri climb in showing the way for other groups of would-be Australian Himalayan climbers.

It was Peter Allen’s idea to mount an expedition and since he had the organisational skills needed to plan and run a Himalayan expedition, he was endorsed as the leader. He and Max Berry, another climber in the group, did much of the research and the bureaucratic legwork needed to get the trip off the ground and into the field in the Himalaya. Ed Neve and Gary Wills completed the six-man climbing team (see image 15.1).

As their objective, the group settled on White Sail—now known officially as Dharamsura—a 6445 m mountain in the Kulu region of India. It was the ideal choice for a first trip to the Himalaya—far more appropriate than the ANUMC’s Dunagiri objective the previous year. That peak, although climbed by Tim Macartney-Snape, proved much too high, difficult and dangerous for most of the ANUMC team. White Sail, on the other hand, was of moderate height and offered enough stretches of difficult climbing to make the ascent interesting. Furthermore, it had no continuous stretches of difficulties and danger—like Dunagiri’s summit ridge—to make the ascent desperate. Finally, with just a three-day march to the base of the mountain, it was one of the most accessible of all Himalayan peaks.

The White Sail expedition went smoothly from the start. It was only eight months from the time the idea surfaced over a beer in a pub until the team’s departure for India. After obtaining the peak permit within a week after arriving in New Delhi—quite a short time by the standards of Indian bureaucracy—the climbers were on a bus headed for Manali and the start of the walk in. Even the bus ride was tame compared with the epic journey of the Mulkila expeditioners in the same region of India four years earlier, although Berry noted that ‘to find comfort on an Indian bus you have to be no taller than five feet, no wider than one foot and have a cast iron backside’.³

The climbing also was generally straightforward—just about right for a first trip to the Himalaya. Much of it was snow climbing on moderately angled slopes, but there were a couple of icefalls, with their crevasse fields and steep pitches of climbing, to negotiate (see image 15.2). Add to that a storm, some avalanche conditions and a forced retreat and you have a rather complete Himalayan experience. Allen described the retreat as ‘an eerie journey down through a strange white and grey landscape as we followed the seemingly aimless wanderings of our old tracks in and out among the hidden crevasses and the swirling cloud’.⁴

2 A. Rothfield, Interview.

3 Berry, M. 1980, ‘White Sail: the approach’, *Backpack*, no. 2, pp. 15–19.

4 Allen, P. 1980, ‘White Sail: the ascent’, *Backpack*, no. 2, pp. 20–3.

White Sail: the magic of a first Himalayan summit

Peter Allen

We were soon at grips with the steeper ground of the icecliffs. Ed led the first pitch over a bergschrund and upward and leftward below a huge wall of icicles. Gary and I followed, then it was my lead on the traverse left along the base of the icicle wall. It wasn't as hard as it had seemed from below, although the ice was rotten and brittle and I just reached the end of the wall before the rope ran out. I put in a couple of ice screws and the others came across. The stance was rather small and Gary had to dangle on an ice screw while Ed pushed straight on up. That was the end of the steep stuff and Ed's belay was only a ropelength below the south ridge.

What a ropelength! The snow was steep and bottomless and cut by a series of slots that you could only see when you fell into them. The most effective way to make progress was by a cross between breast stroke and dog paddle. By the time we reached the crest of the ridge we had left a trench we could still see as we descended the glacier 1000 metres below, the next day.

We found a sheltered hollow on the broad ridge crest and stopped to get our breath back. Before us was a new panorama which had previously been hidden behind White Sail. Directly opposite was the huge east face of Papsura and the steep sinuous ridges of beautiful Devachen. Behind these were the endless brown ranks of the mysterious peaks of Ladakh.

The summit ridge seemed very long. It rose in gentle steps until the final summit cone which produced two pitches of steeper ice as a last token gesture before a small snow summit. At first we were not quite sure it was the summit but a glance over the other side and the small red pennant left by a previous Japanese expedition confirmed that it was. It was 3:30 in the afternoon.

A strong wind had sprung up as we approached and on the top we had to shout to be heard. We took a few pictures and ritually devoured our three jelly beans each before setting off down. The valleys were rapidly filling with swirling clouds and the wind stung our cheeks. Eight months of preparations and a month of travelling to reach the top and we stood there for less than five minutes!

We raced down the ridge and plunged over the side into the trench which led down to the icecliffs. As soon as we dropped off the crest of the ridge we were enveloped in thick cloud and visibility dropped to about half a ropelength. The return trip through the icecliffs was uneventful and by 6pm we were trudging back across the football field in the dark. Even after I remembered to take my sunglasses off it was still very gloomy. The batteries in the headtorch were almost flat so we saved it for the more difficult stretches further down.

We eventually came out of the cloud in time to see a long purple line on the horizon fade and disappear. The headtorch came out at last and we traversed back towards the col and down onto the glacier. We stumbled along like drunks behind the feeble flicker of the torch until, quite suddenly, the tents appeared. We had been gone for exactly 12 hours.

As we reached the tents a cold wind swept up the glacier and grew steadily more violent. We crawled wearily into our sleeping bags and Ed and Gary managed to produce a mug of nearly-hot chocolate. Spindrift began to beat on the tent walls and the wind raged all night but we were too tired to care.

By morning it was calm again. I awoke to find the sides of my tent crushed by windpacked snow. I could not turn over and my sleeping bag was coated with ice. The morning sun eventually thawed things out and after a leisurely breakfast we set off for the glacier camp in perfect conditions. In three hours we charged down what had taken a day and a half to climb. Success was short-lived however, because the others had abandoned the glacier camp. The snow had all disappeared and there was nothing there now but bare ice and running water.

The sun was sinking as we wearily dropped our packs on the grassy shelf where the next camp was pitched. All around the peaks glowed gold and crimson. The six of us were all together again on solid, horizontal earth. Max thrust a mug of steaming hot tea into my hands and there was nowhere else I would rather have been.

From 'White Sail: the ascent', *Backpack*, no. 2 (1980), p. 23.

Within three weeks of arriving at base camp, the team had put all but one of the members on the summit of White Sail. Rheinberger and Rothfield were the first up, and Allen, Neve and Wills followed them to the top a few days later. The southern Australian section of the NZAC had achieved a solid success in its first Himalayan attempt.

Rheinberger was quick to follow up the White Sail ascent. Just a year later he was back in the Himalaya again, leading a southern section–NZAC expedition to Changabang in the Garhwal region of India. In choosing Changabang, Rheinberger was following the recommended pattern of building up Himalayan experience in a progression of peaks increasing gradually in height and difficulty. At 6864 m, Changabang, an exceptionally beautiful mountain, is about 400 m higher than White Sail. The East Ridge route—probably the easiest on the mountain and the one attempted by the Sydney group in their 1977 expedition (Chapter 9)—was nevertheless steeper, more sustained, more exposed and more difficult technically than the ascent of White Sail. It was just about the ideal second peak to try; Rheinberger was doing things strictly by the book.

In addition to Rheinberger, the Changabang team included three other White Sail members: Allen, Berry and Rothfield. Melbourne climbers Paul Anderson, John Dunlop, Tim Hughes and Pat Miller also joined the team, which was completed by the addition of Malcolm Noble, a member of the 1977 group that had come so close to getting to the top of the peak. Noble's inclusion meant that the team had that valuable firsthand experience of the access route through the Rishi Gorge, of siting of base camp and higher camps on the mountain and of general snow and ice conditions on the Kalanka Face and the summit ridge.

Knowledge of the route through the treacherous Rishi Gorge did not, however, make it any easier—nor did the retinue of 70 goats, which were taken along as load-bearing animals to avoid the problem of hiring additional porters to carry food for the others. The goats did admirably well, as expected, on the rugged tracks clinging to the gorge walls high above the Rishi Ganga, but it was a different matter when the track dropped down to a river crossing. One particular crossing was difficult, as Rheinberger recalled: 'We toiled for about one hour, felling trees, dragging them to the water and man-handling them into position. They were then lashed with spare rope and stepping stones laid across. Once enticed onto the structure, the agile goats danced across and we breathed a collective sigh of relief.'⁵ It was then decided, however, since the gorge became even more difficult ahead, that that would be the end of the line for the goats.

5 Rheinberger, M. 1981, 'Changabang', *Mountaineering '81* (Melbourne University Mountaineering Club journal), pp. 38–46.

Beyond the junction of the outflow of the Rhamani Glacier, where the route to the Dunagiri base camp branches off, the Rishi Gorge, as Rheinberger describes,

narrows and becomes increasingly sinister. Down to the left 500 m below us somewhere was the Rishi. High above it colossal cliffs reared. We travelled slowly, following a devious path that wound tortuously in and out of gullies and defiles...In places the way seemed impassable but always the track found a gully or a terrace and snaked onwards and upwards toward the Sanctuary.⁶

Just when the team appeared to be safely out of the gorge, disaster nearly struck Tim Hughes. Rheinberger recounted the incident, as the group was crossing the northern branch of the Rishi on the way to the base of Changabang:

The porters refused to cross and continued on up the true left bank of the stream. On a belay I took a climbing rope across and fixed a hand-line. It was here that we almost lost Tim, who let go one hand during his crossing and was swiftly carried away until slammed and held against a rock mid-stream. Several of us swiftly formed a human chain and fished him out but he required three hours in a sleeping bag to thaw out.⁷

Base camp was established at the foot of the Changabang Glacier, about 6 km from the base of the mountain and therefore too far away to be of much practical use as a climbing base. Advanced base camp was set up at the foot of the Kalanka Face and the first period of the climb was spent simply carrying up loads to stock the upper camp.

The climb was attempted in pure alpine style in that no trips were made above advanced base camp until the climbers began the push for the summit itself. Loaded with food and fuel for two camps and a possible bivouac, they made rapid progress up the lower reaches of the Kalanka Face and established camp one on a hacked-out, narrow ledge of ice about halfway up the face. More steady progress the next day brought them to within 100 m of the col, where they set up their second camp.

Already, however, attrition had begun to take a toll. Berry did not climb above advanced base camp, Hughes was moving very slowly early on and retreated from low on the face and Dunlop and Miller turned back from a point a little higher as Dunlop was not acclimatising well. That left five of the original nine climbers—Allen, Anderson, Noble, Rheinberger and Rothfield—to carry on.

A short climb above camp two gained the col between Kalanka and Changabang and the start of the East Ridge proper. Then the climbing really got interesting, according to Rheinberger:

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

[T]he ridge ahead curved up steeply, a long, narrow, corniced knife-blade which terminated about 500 m up on a conspicuous bump. This was the lower summit and beyond it, hidden from view, was the true summit about 100 m higher. It was a splendid situation. On the Nanda Devi, or southern side, the face seemed to average about 50 degrees, somewhat steeper in places. Numerous runnels and scours indicated that most of the newly fallen snow had slid off and we judged the ridge to be objectively safe. To the north, the face fell away at a fearsome angle, the cornice leaning to that side.⁸

The team made steady progress along the difficult ridge but still found themselves significantly short of the summit late in the afternoon (see image 15.3). The expected bivouac turned into a reality as they hastily dug a rudimentary snow cave. The next morning an exhausted Noble announced that he had had enough and when his rope-mate declined to descend with him, Allen agreed to do so. That left only Anderson, Rheinberger and Rothfield to continue on up the ridge towards the top. Rheinberger takes up the story just below the summit:

The next pitch was very steep, on the crest of the ridge. I struggled with the wind and at one point had to proceed bent over like a chimpanzee. The others had me on a good belay, and I soon reached the top of the difficult section. From there I picked my way along a gentle rise towards the summit. Just short of it, the rope ran out and I bridled my impatience as the others climbed through. Another five minutes and we were all shaking hands on the top.

I was surprised at my feelings. There was nothing like the emotional elation I had experienced on Dharamsura; just a sense of achievement and satisfaction at a task accomplished. Still the position was stunning. To the west lay Dunagiri, and as my eye swept round to the north I recognised the Badrinath/Kedarnath peaks, Kamet, then, in the distance, the Tibetan plateau and remote snow caps. Further around was Hardeol, then the steep Kalanka west ridge, followed by the peaks of the Sanctuary. By climbing to the lip (on a good belay!) we were able to look straight on to Nanda Devi and the peaks of the Southern Sanctuary. It was a splendid moment but the wind was chilling. Photographs, the Australian and Indian flags, a bite of chocolate, and it was time to begin the descent.⁹

The Changabang success was another milestone in Australian Himalayan climbing. It was the first Australian ascent of this beautiful mountain and it was the second-highest peak climbed by Australians at that time. Two years earlier, the ANUMC team had succeeded on Dunagiri, just to the west and only about 200 m higher than Changabang.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

More importantly, the climb was another success for the southern Australian section of the NZAC and for the trio of Allen, Rheinberger and Rothfield. They were progressing steadily up the learning curve of Himalayan mountaineering; a few more successes would put them in position to tackle one of the 8000 m peaks and, eventually, Mt Everest.

Before their celebrations of the Changabang ascent had even finished, however, tragedy struck the team. On the walk out from the mountain, Tim Hughes, who had a narrow escape on the walk in, was not so lucky. He slipped while traversing one of the treacherous sections of the Rishi Gorge, fell from the track and was killed. It was a staggering psychological blow to the group and turned their magnificent achievement on Changabang into a hollow, bittersweet victory.

The tragic death of Hughes meant more than the loss of a good friend and climbing companion to the Melbourne mountaineering community. Just before the Changabang trip, Hughes had written to Peter Allen suggesting that the bicentenary in 1988 would be an appropriate time for an Australian attempt on Mt Everest. Like Peter Gration, Hughes and Australian film producer Mike Dillon had the vision to see that a realistic attempt on the world's highest mountain required years of preparation and that 1980 was therefore not too early to begin planning for an expedition eight years in the future. Furthermore, they were able to follow up immediately on the idea. Before the Changabang expedition, the pair was in Nepal working on a film about the life of Sir Edmund Hillary. At that time, Hughes dropped by the Ministry of Tourism in Kathmandu and applied for the South Col route on Everest in 1988 on behalf of the southern Australian section of the NZAC. The permit was granted early in 1981—after Hughes had been killed.

So the two strands of Australian Himalayan climbing—the AAA and the southern Australian section of the NZAC—which would eventually combine to form the ABEE were each initially pushed towards Everest by people destined to take no significant part in the expedition itself. Peter Gration was unable to become heavily involved in the AAA build-up to Everest due to the heavy demands of his career and, of course, Hughes' involvement ended with the accident on the return from Changabang.

Work commitments prevented Mike Rheinberger from undertaking an expedition in 1981, so two years elapsed between the Changabang ascent and his next trip to the Himalaya. By 1982, the active core of the Melbourne climbing group had changed somewhat. A year earlier, Andrew Rothfield had decided to withdraw from active climbing and Peter Allen was unavailable for an overseas trip in 1982. (He had just returned from a year of climbing in the United Kingdom and the United States; one of his achievements during that period was a traverse of Denali

from the north.) Rheinberger was able to recruit Ed Neve and Gary Wills—both members of the White Sail expedition—to his team and added three newcomers to Himalayan climbing: Keith Egerton, Hugh Foxcroft and Tom Millar.

Despite the dangerous, difficult and uncomfortable passage up the Rishi Gorge, Rheinberger was enticed back to the Nanda Devi Sanctuary in 1982. This time the objective was Nanda Devi itself—at 7816 m, the queen of the sanctuary and the highest peak in the Indian Himalaya. It was yet another step up in height and difficulty from Changabang and a next logical step in the steady progression towards the Himalayan giants and then Everest. Also, Rheinberger was captivated by the exploration and mountaineering feats of Shipton and Tilman, who first forged a passage up the famous Rishi Gorge.

The bad luck that struck the Changabang group during its retreat from the sanctuary plagued the Nanda Devi expedition from the start. On arriving in New Delhi, Rheinberger discovered that an attempt on Nanda Devi required a second permit from the Ministries of Home Affairs and Defence in addition to the normal permit from the Indian Mountaineering Foundation. Having additional, unexpected hassles with the Indian bureaucracy at the start of an expedition was not a good omen.

Shortly thereafter, the Rishi Gorge nearly claimed a second Australian victim. Hugh Foxcroft was close to disaster crossing the Trisul River, as Rheinberger recalled:

While attempting a photograph, Hugh slipped and quickly found himself in the raging torrent. Quite remarkably he managed to jam himself between boulders and hung on until he was able to have a rope thrown him. Two hours in his sleeping bag and plenty of hot tea and he was up to moving again, though badly shaken physically and mentally bruised.¹⁰

The next mishap occurred as the team was beginning their attempt on the mountain itself. Camp one was situated on a flat section of a spur leading up to the South-East Ridge of Nandi Devi. As the campsite was located just under the ridge, it was subject to occasional rock falls from above.

With Egerton, Neve and Wills in residence after carrying loads from base camp, a rock fall came down during the night and struck Neve while he was asleep in one of the tents. The next morning, the other two found him unconscious with a large wound to his head. Somewhat later, Rheinberger, Foxcroft and Millar arrived from base camp. By that time, Neve had regained consciousness but he was nauseated, his memory was very blurred and he was unable to stand. He was forced to remain at camp one for some time until his condition improved enough that he could be moved.

¹⁰ Rheinberger, M. 1983, 'Nanda Devi 1982', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 36, pp. 86–92.

Meanwhile, Rheinberger began a rescue operation. He, Wills and the expedition's liaison officer set out for the base camp of an Indian expedition attempting Nanda Devi from the north in the hope that their doctor could be spared to attend to Neve or that at least they had a radio so that a message could be sent to Joshimath. The trip was a wasted effort, however, as the Indians had no radio and their doctor, occupied at their camp one, was unable to leave his duties there.

The trio then pushed back in haste to their own base camp, from which the liaison officer and one of the staff members were dispatched to march to Lata as quickly as possible and organise a helicopter. That operation, however, would take a minimum of three days.

The day after the messengers were sent back down through the gorge, the rest of the team were up at camp one preparing to assist Neve from the mountain and back to base camp. Rheinberger observed:

Ed was given 30 minutes of oxygen at 8 litres/min and then with one of us tied in on each side with a short sling to his waist harness, Ed literally could not fall over. With the fifth man carrying his pack we set off and by tedious progress, numerous rest stops and a further administration of oxygen we reached BC in 4½ hours of concentrated effort.¹¹

Rheinberger's woes multiplied at base camp when the next morning Millar was struck with an epileptic seizure. It took the remaining healthy climbers to restrain him until he fell into a deep sleep. The fit came more as a surprise to Millar than to anyone else as he had no previous history of epileptic fits. Now Neve would have company during his evacuation from the sanctuary back to civilisation.

Late on the morning of the appointed day, an Indian Air Force helicopter droned up the gorge and into the sanctuary to collect the stricken climbers. The Indian authorities had, however, expected only one casualty and so had brought along an extra officer for the ride. The evacuation of Millar thus required an extra trip back up the gorge, which the Indian authorities gladly undertook.

Despite the setback of losing not one but two climbers of a small team to injury and illness, Rheinberger was nevertheless keen to have a solid attempt at Nanda Devi. Circumstances, however, had now forced him into a lightweight attempt with a small team in a very limited time. Nanda Devi had become an even more formidable mountain.

¹¹ Ibid.

The number of available climbers was down to four: Egerton, Foxcroft, Rheinberger and Wills. Their first task was to regain camp two, which had been established on the ridge itself before the accident, stock it and push the route up to camp three. Hopefully, that would be the top camp—in striking distance of the summit with a long day's effort.

The attempt ran into trouble almost immediately. The climbing above camp two proved harder than expected, with rocky gendarmes and then a sharp ice ridge slowing progress. At least there was plenty of old fixed rope along the route from previous expeditions—badly needed to supplement the team's meagre supplies—but it required careful testing and refixing to ensure reliability.

Another blow was the further reduction of the team's strength. Hugh Foxcroft had continual problems with acclimatisation during the expedition and, despite a valiant effort in carrying loads to camp two and one above, he was forced to retire from the attempt before camp three was established. Keith Egerton, too, was soon forced off the mountain. Suffering badly in the wind and extreme cold of the exposed ridge above camp two, he appeared to have contracted retinal haemorrhaging and had to descend. That left only Rheinberger and Wills to carry on.

The odds for success were now very long indeed. With only two active climbers and no back-up, much difficult climbing still lay ahead. It had become apparent that another camp would be needed above camp three and even with that the summit day would be long and arduous.

Still the pair battled on. Above camp three, the difficulty of the climbing eased only slightly, with a band of rotten rock providing the major problem. To ensure that they would be able to retreat rapidly in case of bad weather higher on the mountain, the two climbers took considerable care in rearranging and securing the bits of rope left in the rock band by previous expeditions. Finally, above the rock, they regained the crest of the ridge, only to be met by icy gales. It was late in the day and they were forced to drop back down below the ridge crest and secure a bivouac site on a sloping ledge. The continuing strong wind, which precluded the erection of a tent, and intense cold were definite threats, as Rheinberger recalled:

Gary's cup of tea and soup were splendid and we settled into our sleeping bags out of the wind which was whipping up spindrift and threatening to take away anything not firmly lashed down. I tied into my axe and hammer and with singlet, wool shirt, pile jacket and duvet, in my bag I was quite warm enough but now that activity had ceased I became acutely aware of a most peculiar sensation in my toes, something between a numbness and a slight tingle.

The morning of 28 September was cold and extremely windy. It was difficult to move and pack without spindrift entering pack, sleeping bag and clothing. There was no question of lighting the stove. Our concern was to regain the ridge and drop back to C3 to sit out the wind until a better day.

At C3 Gary had a brew going and in the shelter of the tent we looked forward to a good night's sleep. Hopefully the wind would blow over and we could go up again.

However, over dinner, Gary revealed suspected frost nip on several fingers. His flesh was extremely cold, the skin blanched and sensation gone from the finger tips. I then noticed that I had also had a similar condition on two or three fingers.¹²

Rheinberger and Wills judged that the risk of more serious damage to their hands was very high if they continued, so they retreated back down the mountain without further delay. The attempt on Nanda Devi was over.

On the surface of it, the Nanda Devi expedition would have to be considered a failure. Indeed, it seemed to teeter on the brink of disaster throughout. Foxcroft was fortunate not to have drowned in the Rishi on the walk in; Neve could easily have been killed by the rock fall at camp one; and Millar's sudden attack of epilepsy might have ended in a far more severe medical emergency. The group was lucky to escape with everyone alive; multiple deaths could just as easily have been the outcome.

On another level, however, the trip was a considerable success. The group, and particularly the leader, Rheinberger, undoubtedly learned much more from the experience than if they had made a straightforward ascent of the mountain. Rheinberger had to organise two rescues quickly and efficiently to ensure the safety of his stricken colleagues, and as a result had to revise considerably his planned attack on the mountain at several stages. Despite all these problems, which in the end severely reduced the strength of an already small party, Rheinberger and his team made a very credible attempt on the peak.

The Nanda Devi expedition was thus another important step in their careful progression towards Mt Everest. It was a higher and more difficult mountain than either White Sail or Changabang. Rheinberger and Wills climbed to about 7400 m—higher than either of them had previously climbed. Furthermore, they gained a wealth of experience in coping with the unexpected twists and turns of a Himalayan expedition.

So, who were the Australians who had booked Mt Everest in 1980? They were a core group of Melbourne-based mountaineers from the southern Australian section of the NZAC. They had booked Mt Everest two years ahead of the AAA and their build-up of Himalayan experience was also well advanced compared with that of the AAA. If they continued to progress at their rate of the early 1980s, they would be in a very strong position by 1988 to make the first Australian ascent of Mt Everest by the classic South Col route.

¹² Ibid.

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.