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An arranged marriage

By the 1980s, large expeditions had become something of an anachronism in the Himalaya. Although Mt Everest was first climbed in 1953 by a very large British expedition, the trend since then has undoubtedly been towards small, lightweight teams. Not only are they much less expensive and logistically simpler, they mean that the mountain is attempted in what climbers call the ‘best style’—that is, the emphasis is on the strength, stamina and skill of the individual climbers rather than on organisation and sheer numbers of climbers.

The first Australian ascent of Mt Everest in 1984 was a classic example of an expedition in the modern lightweight style. It became almost ridiculously lightweight, as Andy Henderson quipped, when a significant amount of gear was buried at the bottom of the mountain by an avalanche. In the end, the ascent was a triumph of determination and persistence, as the small group of mountaineers climbed most of the massive North Face in a single push.

It was an attempt in a similar style that Michael Rheinberger and his colleagues in the Melbourne climbing community had in mind when they made plans in the early 1980s for their eventual attempt on the world’s highest peak in 1988. At that time, the Army Alpine Association (AAA) was only beginning to formulate its own ideas for Everest in the bicentenary. There was no contact between the two groups and both were blissfully unaware of the labyrinthine organisational manoeuvres that would later lead to the formation of the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE).

The Melbourne group’s plan was to mount a small, lightweight expedition consisting of about eight climbers. Although their route—the South Col route—was closely linked with very big, siege-style expeditions, they were modelling their attempt after

a 1977 New Zealand expedition that used modern tactics on the traditional route. The Kiwis eventually ran out of steam at the South Col, but the Australian team hoped to find that extra bit of drive that would get them to the summit.

Planning proceeded smoothly for the southern Australian section of the NZAC until September 1983, when the AAA received official approval from the Nepalese authorities to attempt Mt Everest's West Ridge in the pre-monsoon season of 1988. Why should that affect the Melbourne group's plans? After all, their permit and that of the AAA were for different routes. Furthermore, the planned style of the AAA West Ridge attempt—a large expedition with many climbers, heavy Sherpa support and copious amounts of bottled oxygen—was the antithesis of that of the Melbourne group.

Yet, despite the strong desire of Rheinberger and his colleagues to maintain their own small team and their own style of climbing and the equally strong desire of elements of the AAA to attempt the West Ridge in their preferred style, the two groups were inexorably drawn together into one large expedition. In retrospect, the fact that both expeditions would take place in the bicentenary worked strongly against the two groups maintaining their independence.

Finance also played an important role. An expedition to Mt Everest is a very expensive affair, even for a lightweight attempt. The booking fee alone is very high. Both groups were therefore in need of external financial support—the AAA group probably less so as they would most likely get some support from the army. Clearly, it would be counterproductive for two different Australian expeditions—both attempting Mt Everest in the pre-monsoon season of 1988—to compete for support from the same group of potential sponsors.

Even more damaging would be open competition for support from the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA), which was undoubtedly the single largest potential source of direct financial assistance. Both groups were in need of cash from the ABA, so when the ABA later declared that it would not countenance two separate Australian Everest expeditions during the bicentenary, there was no choice but to merge, at least organisationally.

The army climbers were aware for some time before they obtained their permit for the West Ridge that the Melbourne group would be climbing the original route at the same time. About the time the AAA team gained approval for the West Ridge route (September 1983), Pat Cullinan, Mike Rheinberger, Peter Allen and Andrew Rothfield met at Rheinberger's house to discuss the situation. The meeting was cordial but unproductive. The Melbourne climbers, naturally enough, wanted to maintain their expedition as a small, closely knit, lightweight one. Merging with the AAA would immeasurably change the character of the trip and the civilian climbers were therefore very cool towards the idea.

Also about that time, the army climbers had put a formal organisation in place for their attempt on Everest. An interim Everest Committee of Management (ECM) was formed in August 1983 at a meeting at Fritz Schaumburg's house in Melbourne. Cullinan was elected chairman, with Brian Agnew vice-chairman and Zac Zaharias, Peter Lambert and Schaumburg members. During the next few months, in his research on legal and financial aspects of the expedition, Cullinan also enlisted the services of John Peryman, a former Army Reservist who managed a consulting company, to coordinate the fundraising efforts. Since the AAA effort on the West Ridge would be a big one in the traditional style, considerable support would be needed.

Events began to unfold rapidly from the end of 1983 to mid-1984, and the union between the two groups finally began to form, albeit along a somewhat rocky path. The AAA ECM (renamed the West Ridge Everest Committee, WREC) met again in November 1983, by which time it had become apparent to the army group that, despite their plans for a siege-style assault on the West Ridge, some form of cooperation with the civilian climbers would be useful. They decided to try again to form one 'umbrella' expedition but with the two groups retaining their individual routes.

The civilian group, too, had begun to realise that some sort of formal organisational merger was necessary. Peter Allen had lodged an application with the ABA in mid-1983 for financial assistance for their Everest attempt. When an application also appeared from the AAA for support for an Everest expedition in 1988, the ABA made it clear that they preferred a single Australian expedition to attempt Everest. Support for neither group was thus forthcoming. It appeared obvious that a merger was required to gain ABA support. What very much complicated the issue, however—and very nearly destroyed the fragile partnership that was beginning to emerge between the two groups—was alleged correspondence later in 1983 from the army to the ABA.

Mike Rheinberger said:

What greatly upset us [the civilian group] was the appearance of a letter which was written to the bicentennial authority from defence headquarters. The letter tried to point out that the authority would be much better advised to sling its financial weight behind the army attempt because the army attempt would have a much greater chance of success than the attempt by relatively few civilian climbers.¹

The alleged letter fuelled the suspicions of the civilian group. They were already very wary of their impending forced marriage to the AAA as that union, despite its preservation of the separate routes, would impinge on their plans for a relatively small, tightly knit attempt on Everest. They no doubt felt a little like the small,

1 M. Rheinberger, Interview.

cohesive company that was suddenly subject to a takeover bid by a larger corporation. Furthermore, the delicate question of financial support was another bone that stuck in the craw of the civilian climbers. 'Another galling aspect of the whole business,' Rheinberger pointed out, 'was that the army already had a lot of support behind it.'²

The content of the alleged letter, indeed even its existence, remained a controversial issue well after the expedition itself. Several members of the AAA denied its existence, while the core of the Melbourne climbing community that participated in the ABEE claimed to have held a copy of the letter but declined to make it available. An attempt to obtain a copy of the letter from the liquidator of the ABA was not successful; the letter was not among the file of correspondence provided.

Despite the ill-feeling generated by the alleged letter, the two groups met jointly for the first time later in November at Bonegilla, a small town near Wodonga, Victoria. At that meeting, an ABEE committee was officially formed, consisting of Pat Cullinan, Peter Lambert and Zac Zaharias of the AAA and Peter Allen, Mike Rheinberger and Andrew Rothfield of the Melbourne group.

Shortly thereafter, Allen and Lambert drafted a single, joint proposal for support to the ABA. In addition, the AAA had completed its Everest plan and had submitted it to the army for approval. At least now a single Australian expedition would go to Mt Everest in 1988, which would make support much more likely from the ABA.

Cullinan met with General Gratton in January 1984 and secured his enthusiastic support for the AAA plan. That was a big step forward in eventually gaining official army approval. More good news came two months later when the ABA expressed support in principle for the joint expedition, although it indicated that a financial grant would be forthcoming only when the ABEE was already on a firm financial footing.

In May 1984, the ABEE committee met again, this time in Watsonia, Victoria, and with the AAA's financial consultant, John Peryman, in attendance. The meeting was a milestone in the development of the ABEE. To assist fundraising, the committee was incorporated as a limited liability company. A formal committee was elected, consisting of Cullinan as president, Zaharias as vice-president, Peryman as secretary/treasurer and Allen, Rheinberger, Lambert and Rothfield as board members. A Sydney-based executive committee of Cullinan, Zaharias and Peryman was formed to handle the day-to-day operation of the ABEE. It was decided at the meeting that a formal joint plan should be developed, including objectives, organisation and method of operation.

2 Ibid.

In October 1984, Pat Cullinan and John Peryman met in the Army Office in Canberra to present the plan to Major General Neville Smethurst, the Chief of Operations—Army. His support was vital from the AAA's point of view—both for the availability of climbers (the army climbers needed permission from their individual commanding officers to take part in the expedition) and for the resources the army could potentially provide.

A big hurdle was cleared when Smethurst approved army support for the plan. Army personnel participating in the expedition would be classified as 'on duty' and would thus continue to be paid for the duration of the expedition. Just as importantly, Smethurst's support meant that significant parts of army operations, such as communications and transport, would be available to assist the expedition.

By the end of 1984, a reasonable working relationship had been established between the two groups. The key to the successful merger was the preservation of the two routes; the two teams could operate pretty much as they had originally planned. Indeed, the plan made a virtue of necessity in that the two teams could attempt a double traverse of Everest—a feat never before accomplished. If things went well, the civilian group would climb the mountain via the South Col route and descend via the West Ridge; the AAA team would climb the West Ridge and descend via the South Col. With a bit of luck in timing, the two teams could celebrate together on the summit.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the ABEE climbers exhausted their energies in 1983 and 1984 in simply getting the expedition organised. Considerable effort was expended in getting the ABEE off the ground. Nevertheless, many of the team did not forget that the ultimate aim of the whole exercise was to get out into the mountains and climb.

The AAA was back again in the Himalaya in the post-monsoon season of 1983. After their tragic attempt on Ganesh IV in 1981, the army had regrouped and mounted a successful trip to Denali in Alaska the next year. The next step was to have a go at another 7000 m peak in the Himalaya, so they settled on Nilgiri North—a 7061 m mountain in the Annapurna Range of central Nepal—as an appropriate target.

Nilgiri North was a turning point for the AAA in its preparation for Everest. The Nilgiri North expedition was organised by Terry McCullagh and Zac Zaharias, with Zaharias, who had led the successful climb of Denali in 1982, as the leader. Zaharias realised by early 1983—even before the two groups that would attempt Everest in 1988 had begun to come together—that cooperation on the mountain would be essential. He took the opportunity, in keeping with AAA policy, to get that cooperation under way by inviting Peter Allen along on the Nilgiri North trip (see image 16.1). The inclusion of Allen had an important effect on creating the

necessary partnership between the AAA and the Melbourne group and was a vital antidote to the somewhat poisonous interactions that were occurring simultaneously at the organisational level.

Zaharias was in a good position to begin building the bridge between the two groups. He regularly climbed with civilians in New Zealand and maintained a close connection with the Sydney-based northern Australian section of the NZAC. In fact, he became chairman of the section in 1983 and 1984.

The Nilgiri North expedition was also critical for the morale of the AAA. It was then eight years since Peter Gratton had conceived the idea of Australian soldiers on top of Everest; less than five years remained until the pre-monsoon season of 1988. The AAA was still a long way from having a reasonably sized cadre of strong, experienced Himalayan climbers. Indeed, the army climbers had not yet succeeded on a 7000 m peak and had only one Himalayan ascent to their collective credit (the ascent of Tseringma by Pat Cullinan's Perth-based SAS unit in 1980). A failure on Nilgiri North would be a blow from which the AAA would have great difficulty recovering.

Nilgiri North—about the same height as Ganesh IV—was more difficult technically but at least the route was considerably less threatened by avalanches. The AAA team was climbing from the south-east side—a route climbed once previously, by a Japanese expedition the previous year. The most difficult section of the climb would be the very narrow South-East Ridge itself.

Even before the climbing began, however, Zaharias had a medical emergency on his hands.

The paradox on the expedition was that of all members of the team it was the doctor who needed to be evacuated as he had developed pneumonia at base camp. His condition deteriorated from the time of arrival and was not assisted by the poor weather. Luckily an Italian doctor was available at Annapurna I base camp only 20 minutes away. He was able to diagnose and care for him. Due to his condition the decision was made on 13 October to send for a helicopter. Any further delay could have resulted in death.³

The doctor, Bruce Fox of the Royal Australian Air Force, had duty status for the time at base camp but not for travel to Nepal and the walk-in. He made the classic mistake of rushing up to high altitude much too quickly.

³ Zaharias, Z. 1984, *Report on expedition to Nepalese Himalaya 20 Sep 83 – 16 Nov 83*, [AAA Nilgiri report], 28 September 1984, Australian Army Alpine Association, Canberra.

Another classic problem developed soon after the climbing began, when the team was split into a lead and a support group of climbers. The lead climbing team consisted of Dave Evans and Phil Pitham of the AAA, Peter Allen and Mark Whetu, a New Zealand civilian. Zaharias, Peter Lambert and Terry McCullagh, all AAA members, formed the support team.

Zaharias recalled, 'It was the same old situation—the lead climbers thought the support group weren't pulling their weight and the support group thought the leaders were a bunch of prima donnas.'⁴ McCullagh had a slightly different perspective, in that any friction arose because the roles of the two groups did not change during the entire expedition so his group did not get a chance to do any lead climbing.⁵

The strategy was to establish camp one at the base of a couloir that led to the ridge (see image 16.2), put camp two on the ridge at the top of the couloir (5500 m) and then perhaps make an alpine-style push from there. On gaining the ridge, the climbers were in for a surprise, as Lambert remembered: 'The climb was very protected until we got to the ridge, then suddenly became terribly exposed. We got a huge shock to our systems when we went up there for the first time.'⁶

Pitham was also impressed:

The top of the couloir was a knife-edged ridge, with nowhere to pitch a tent or even dump gear without a great deal of digging. We tried a few spots, only to find hard ice just below the surface. Then Mark, wandering off by himself, found a buried schrund... The entrance was on the other side of the ridge and very exposed, so we put in a fixed rope to prevent stepping out of the door and ending up 1000 metres lower.⁷

The climbing above camp two proved difficult and very exposed (see images 16.3 and 16.4), so the lead team spent a week putting in 800 m of fixed rope. A further camp was established above ice cliffs at the end of the ridge itself. From there, in deteriorating weather, Evans, Whetu and Pitham went for the top; Allen was recovering from being hit by a rock fall and had dropped back down to join the second group.

'We spent a terrible night [at camp three] with the three of us crammed in a two man Omnipotent,' Pitham said:

Rime kept falling all night and by morning everything was sodden. After a half cup of tea each for breakfast, we began the painful process of dressing. Not a very pleasant day for climbing; 25 below zero and we could only see 50 metres because of the cloud being whipped across the mountain.

4 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

5 T. McCullagh, Correspondence.

6 P. Lambert, Interview.

7 Pitham, P. 1984, 'Nilgiri', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 37, pp. 56–8.

We climbed the last of the ice cliffs and through a series of wind scoops. The weather was deteriorating as we made our way across a small plateau to the final summit pyramid. Mark and I cowered in a sheltered groove trying to warm frozen feet, while Dave pressed on alone, not wanting to get cold himself. Mark and I followed soon after. The summit came as a surprise only 20 minutes later. There was too much cloud to see a lot, and too cold to hang about, so we took a few quick photos and raced down to Camp III.⁸

Two days later, the other four climbers reached the top, but only after some demanding climbing. Allen, Lambert, McCullagh and Zaharias, along with Maila Pemba, made the arduous ascent to camp three in a long day, with Lambert and Zaharias suffering from the cold and altitude on arrival at the camp. The next day, all five continued on to the summit and returned to camp three safely and in good time (see image 16.5).

On the descent of the second team after their summit success, however, a conflict involving the clearing of gear from the mountain soured the expedition's success. Peter Allen and Maila Pemba carried large loads down, but much gear remained on the mountain. At camp three, a lively discussion started when Zaharias proposed that the mountain be cleared of fixed rope; the discussion centred on the ethics of leaving the mountain clean versus the risk of spending extra time on the route. McCullagh was particularly keen to avoid further risk given the objective danger on the exposed, steep route between camps two and three, while others judged the objective danger to be somewhat less and thus opted for removing as much gear as possible. In addition, Zaharias thought that the plan might give the second team a chance to 'lead' by spending a couple of days clearing the mountain.

Eventually a compromise was reached whereby McCullagh and Lambert abseiled first and Zaharias came down last, doubling the rope through the anchors and then retrieving it. The three were then to share the load carrying. This system seemed to work well at first. The three climbers worked as they descended, first clearing the fixed ropes between camp three and the rock band and then, the next day, returning from camp two to the rock band to clear it.

All three had heavy loads and were very tired as they descended to the bottom of the couloir below camp two. From there, McCullagh and Lambert continued on to camp one, where they informed Mark Whetu and Phil Pitham, who were already at the camp, that Zaharias was about 20–30 minutes behind them. This left Zaharias with the relatively easier route from the bottom of the couloir to camp one, but with a very heavy load and near the end of an exhausting day.

8 Ibid.

‘I was loaded to the gunnels,’ Zaharias recalled:

In fact, at one time I was carrying eight ropes as well as a host of other gear... It took me a long time to get down by myself. By the time I was out of the couloir it was dark and I nearly missed Camp I. Had it not been for Mark Whetu and Phil Pitham, who, waiting patiently for me at Camp I, switched on a torch inside their tent just as I stumbled past only 100 metres away, I would have ended up heading into the glacier below.⁹

Peter Lambert admitted that leaving Zaharias was ‘the worst decision I’ve ever made in the mountains’.¹⁰ He later apologised to Zaharias and the rest of the team for leaving him on the mountain on his own, but Zaharias’ attempt to patch things up with Terry McCullagh failed. The two had a ‘one-way’ conversation, as Zaharias put it.¹¹ Although the incident seemed a minor one, it was a harbinger of problems that would bedevil the AAA on the lead-up to and during the Everest trip.

Nevertheless, the Nilgiri North success was an enormous morale booster for the AAA. They had climbed their first major Himalayan peak—and indeed only the third 7000 m peak climbed by Australians at that time (after Dunagiri and Annapurna II). It was a demanding and challenging climb that pushed the climbers to their mental and physical limits and clearly showed that the AAA team had the capability to succeed on big Himalayan peaks. They were back on track for Everest in 1988.

The inclusion of Peter Allen in the expedition paid great dividends. Not only did Allen and the AAA climbers establish a very good working relationship on the mountains, Allen’s skills and experience, as Zaharias readily acknowledged, played a key role in the successful ascent: ‘It was a very difficult climb. We certainly needed Peter’s expertise.’¹²

From Allen’s perspective, the Nilgiri success proved that the two groups could work well together: ‘It indicated to me (and therefore the ‘civilians’) that Zac, Peter, and Phil were people we could work with and climb with, and were people who understood our climbing philosophy and have an interest in practising it.’¹³

9 Zaharias, *Report on expedition to Nepalese Himalaya 20 Sep 83 – 16 Nov 83*.

10 P. Lambert, Interview.

11 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

12 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

13 P. Allen, Interview.

Peter Lambert summarised the importance of the Nilgiri North success to the AAA program:

Nilgiri had a tremendous psychological effect on us personally. It showed us what we could do, what our skills really were. And it showed me just what I could and couldn't do, just what my limitations are. That is something you need to know when you try to climb the big mountains.¹⁴

In addition to climbing higher and harder mountains, the AAA needed to expand its pool of high-altitude mountaineers. To that end, Lambert was back in the Himalaya a year later with a group of six relatively inexperienced climbers. He had chosen a most appropriate introduction for the new recruits: two 'trekking peaks' of modest altitude within the Annapurna sanctuary.

The sanctuary, a high, glaciated valley nestled in the middle of the Annapurna Himal and encircled by a ring of spectacular peaks, was a good place for first-timers. Access was via a short, straightforward trek from Pokhara and the base of the valley was not exceedingly high for the location of a base camp.

The term 'trekking peak' conjures in many people's minds the picture of a low Himalayan mountain of no great technical difficulty—in effect, a 'walk-up' suitable for trekkers unskilled in the techniques of alpine climbing. The term, however, is used by Nepalese authorities to describe a specific group of peaks, usually of moderate altitude but of greatly varying technical difficulty, that are open to climbing by foreigners without the necessity of liaison officers and the other bureaucratic accoutrements required for 'expedition peaks'.

Trekking peak expeditions are thus cheaper and less cumbersome to organise; the climbing, however, can be just as difficult and hazardous as that on any other Himalayan mountain.

Lambert first led his group to Tharpu Chuli (Tent Peak, 5000 m), just inside the entrance to the sanctuary. Their initial attempt was turned back by white-out conditions, deep snow and lack of acclimatisation. The team then turned their attention to Singu Chuli (Fluted Peak), a 6501 m mountain that presented a significant mountaineering challenge. Singu Chuli was first climbed in 1957 by Wilfred Noyce and David Cox, members of a strong British expedition that was attempting the nearby Matterhorn look-alike, Machhapuchhare. Since then, Singu Chuli has repulsed most attempts made on its summit.

Approaching the mountain from the north, the AAA team put in two camps, the second a bivouac, in an alpine-style attempt that reached 5950 m before being defeated by what Lambert described as 'appalling snow conditions'.¹⁵

¹⁴ P. Lambert, Interview.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Rape in the rice paddies

Peter Lambert

On the Annapurna Sanctuary expedition, one of the guys—Lawdie—was really sick most of the time. We didn't know why. We thought he had piles, and he thought he had piles, but no-one was willing to look. This was one of the big lessons I learned from this expedition: if someone is sick, you as leader look yourself.

We were at base camp and we got a French doctor, a woman, to look. But she didn't actually look or examine him; she just consulted him. We thought he'd been properly examined as she gave him all these suppositories. We thought Lawdie was going to be fixed. But it got worse...and worse... and worse.

We finished the expedition and he was in absolute agony. He could hardly walk. Eventually, one night, whatever the problem was, burst; and filled the tent with an absolutely foul mixture of molten suppositories. The problem turned out to be an ingrown hair that had gotten infected, but we didn't know that at the time.

Then we went to an Italian doctor. He had a look and said, 'I'm not going to touch that; otherwise you're going to sue me.' So we went down to these bare stepped terraces—all the rice had been harvested. We put a mat down. Then he pulled his trousers down and leaned over the terrace looking up the hill toward the village. His legs were down below the terrace.

We were behind him trying to squeeze all the bad stuff out of his wound. Of course, I never touched him. I wasn't going to do it. I turned to his best mate—Wardie—they were Lawdie and Wardie, both Air Force—and I said, 'Wardie, you're his best mate. You can do the work.'

So we all supervised. We stood around respectfully concerned, albeit slightly amused, as Wardie was squeezing his mate's abscess. He was in absolute pain. Maila Pemba, our Sherpa, was there, and Maila was kept right out of it. 'This is a sahib's problem,' we told him. We just didn't want to involve him in something that was so personal. But he kept snooping around and asking what's wrong. We finally told him, and he said, 'Ah, very, very common. Let me have a look.' And he went in there and gave this thing one almighty squeeze. Lawdie screamed, absolutely screamed.

While he was screaming, there were a couple of Australian nurses walking along a ridge up on top. They looked down and asked, 'What's wrong? What's wrong?' They were really concerned. We said, 'We're OK. We're just working on him a bit.'

In the middle of this Lawdie screamed, 'They're raping me!' The nurses were horrified and promptly ran off. They thought we were doing something very animalistic down there on the terraces. We saw them later in Kathmandu and they wouldn't speak to us.

A few days later, he and two of his recruits returned to nearby Tharpu Chuli and succeeded on the rarely climbed East Face in 'interesting and spectacular climbing'.¹⁶

In 1985, the AAA further expanded its cadre of experienced Himalayan mountaineers with another trip to a group of Nepalese trekking peaks. Rick Moor was the leader of the seven-man climbing team that again ventured into the Annapurna region of central Nepal. Their objectives were Pisang Peak (6091 m), Chulu West (6250 m) and Chulu East (6200 m)—three mountains easily accessible from the popular 'Around Annapurna' trekking route as it passed north of the main Annapurna massif. (The AAA originally had a permit for Kangguru, but did not take it up because of its significantly increased cost compared with trekking peaks.)

¹⁶ Ibid.

Pisang Peak was first to fall, as six of the seven team members struggled to the summit in what Moor said could 'only be described as full conditions'.¹⁷ The descent was complicated by a blizzard, which pinned the climbers high on the mountain for a night. Chulu West was climbed in uneventful fashion with five members reaching the top. Lack of time and diminishing food supplies prevented an attempt on Chulu East.

The success of the Pisang/Chulu expedition was another step towards assembling a large, competent AAA Everest team. Four of the team members who had their introduction to Himalayan climbing on the trip—Moor, Mick Pezet, James Strohfeldt and Jim van Gelder (the last two civilians)—would be members of the ABEE. A fifth eventual ABEE climber, Andrew Smith, was a member of the Pisang/Chulu team and Peter Lambert's group that climbed in the Annapurna Sanctuary in 1984.

Himalayan peaks of moderate altitude, whether they were Nepalese trekking peaks or mountains elsewhere in Asia, seemed to be the order of the day for army climbers in the mid-1980s. In 1984, Steve Simpson joined Dave Evans and Phil Pitham of the Nilgiri team for an attempt on 6000 m Devachen, a beautifully shaped mountain near Dharamsura in the Kulu region of India.

The attempt on the North Ridge ended at 5790 m in spectacular fashion when Pitham suddenly ran into physical problems:

Something happened to me at 19 000 ft. It must have been a mild version of cerebral oedema. I blacked out and went face first into the snow. Four hours of my life went missing. I got down to 16 000 ft and the lights switched back on again. I became aware again and was wondering why we were going down. That was the end of the trip.¹⁸

Undaunted by his close call, Pitham returned to the Kulu in 1985 with Sydney rock climber Frank Moon for an attempt on the East Ridge of 6451 m Papsura. They were joined in the region by Zac Zaharias, who was on leave from United Nations duty as an observer along the India–Pakistan border. The trio had a good look at the predominantly rock route, decided they did not like it and returned to their various duties after climbing another peak in the area.

While the AAA climbers were busy increasing their numbers with Himalayan experience, the Melbourne-based civilian climbers were also actively pursuing their preparation for the 1988 attempt on Everest. As he had been in the early 1980s, Mike Rheinberger was the most active of the group.

17 Moor, R. 1985, *Report on the army expedition to the Nepalese Himalaya 13 Sep – 15 Nov 85*, Report no. R852-5-1(2), 19 December 1985, Australian Army Alpine Association, Canberra.

18 P. Pitham, Interview.

After previously confining his Himalayan mountaineering experience to the Kulu and Garhwal regions of India, Rheinberger journeyed to Nepal in late 1984 for three months of trekking and climbing. (A planned expedition to Pumori [7145 m] in 1983 was abandoned when he fractured an ankle early that year.) Rheinberger chose the winter months to experience the harsher conditions of that season. He began the trip in the Khumbu region of eastern Nepal, where he joined Greg Martin for an attempt on Kwangde, a 6187 m trekking peak near the large Sherpa village of Namche Bazaar.

Just the trip to base camp was somewhat of an epic as the pair crossed the seldom used Moro La directly opposite the airstrip village of Lukla and approached the mountain from the south. Their attempt, at the beginning of the winter season, was abandoned at just above 6000 m after a very cold bivouac.

The main thrust of Rheinberger's 1984 efforts, however, was aimed at Kangguru, a 7010 m peak in a remote region near the Tibetan border to the north-east of the Annapurna Range. The climb would be made in the heart of the winter season—the first time an Australian had attempted to climb in the most severe of the three Nepalese climbing seasons. If Rheinberger was after a taste of the extraordinary cold and vicious winds that winter in the high Himalaya had to offer, he could not have been disappointed.

Climbing with Martin, Englishman Mick Chapman and Sherpa Maila Pemba, he got his first blast at 6400 m:

[A]s we returned to the [VE24] tent we were concerned at the build-up of wind and its variable direction. The VE24 looked far from secure and we debated whether a snow cave might not be more appropriate, but compromised by erecting a substantial wall of snow blocks, three layers thick and about a metre high. Thus fortified, we turned in for what was a harrowing night with little rest. Thankfully, our wall survived more or less intact and protected the tent from what I believe would otherwise have been certain destruction.

Next day the wind scarcely abated and climbing was hardly conceivable. It was difficult to retain footing even on short comfort forays. The valley below was shrouded and plumes flew off the high Annapurnas.¹⁹

The summit attempt the next day by Rheinberger and Maila was stopped at about 6900 m by what Rheinberger described as 'not really climbing weather', with the wind 'gusting most powerfully'.

Around midday we reached the summit ridge. Ahead lay a long curving spine of hard packed snow, frequently smeared with the dull glaze of ice. To the left a rather alarming drop of several thousand feet took one's eye to the glaciers draining the

19 Rheinberger, M. 1985, 'A touch of winter', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 38, pp. 72–5.

main frontier range. To the right I looked down a steepish face towards the south east and the Manaslu group. The wind gusted and tore at my pack forcing a halting progress. Despite two sets of underwear, two pile jackets and parka, I was barely warm enough.

Still, conditions were bearable and we continued to progress. A further one and a half hours saw the ridge steepen sharply and extreme care was required in sensing the gusts and striving to maintain balance...At one point I clung to the ridge, axe and hammer well fixed and crampons well placed, only to feel myself being ever so slowly moved by a tremendous gust. It was probably only a matter of time before one of us mistimed a gust and was off.²⁰

A few days later, Rheinberger and Martin were back up at the top camp for another summit bid. They found that the wind was just as strong and that the three-layer-thick protective ice wall around the earlier tent site had been destroyed. Conditions for this attempt were no better, as Rheinberger reported: 'If anything, the weather was worse than on the day of our previous attempt. It was dangerous to move unroped yet far too slow if we belayed.'²¹ Again they retreated and abandoned the attempt.

After the expedition, Rheinberger was philosophical about the unsuccessful winter attempt on Kangguru: 'We had survived for another day; we had an exciting prospect yet in store; we had felt a touch of winter conditions and I was happier for the experience.'²²

The AAA adventures during 1984–85 and Rheinberger's Khumbu and Kangguru sorties were no doubt full of valuable lessons in Himalayan mountaineering. The winter Kangguru epic was particularly valuable in giving Rheinberger a taste of the very harsh conditions that existed on the upper reaches of Everest during any season. All of those experiences, however, lacked one vital ingredient in the preparation for Everest: coming to grips with the effects of the most extreme altitudes. There was only one way to get that experience and that was to climb on one of the Himalaya's 8000 m peaks.

In 1985, Rheinberger and his longstanding Melbourne colleague Peter Allen rectified that deficiency by joining a large expedition to the north side of Mt Everest: the NZAC Chomolungma expedition 1985 (see image 16.6). What better way to train for the ABEE than to have a preliminary go at the Big E itself?

The New Zealand expedition appeared to have an excellent chance of success. It had 14 climbers, the cream of Southern Alps mountaineering, it was backed by major sponsors at the level of NZ\$170 000 and was officially sanctioned by the NZAC.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

Brimming with confidence based on their vast collective experience on difficult and dangerous snow and ice, the team hoped to put a majority of members on Everest's summit via the West Ridge, from the northern (Tibetan) side.

What they had not reckoned on, however, was the mountain's extreme treachery in the post-monsoon season of 1985. Even by Everest standards, it was a horrific show of massive avalanches and sudden, vicious storms. Even so, the Australian and New Zealand climbers battled away for more than two months on three separate routes, only to retreat frustrated and exhausted with nerves shattered by conditions so full of risk they made many war zones seem like havens of safety in comparison.

The strong team put their initial efforts into the route up the West Ridge. Even very early in that attempt, it became apparent that the mountain was in a dangerous condition, as New Zealander Mike Perry reported: 'About three o'clock every afternoon cloud would come over from Nepal and then it would snow. Never much, maybe a couple of inches, but day by day this snow built up, pushing already loaded and dangerous slopes ever closer to that ugly moment when avalanche was inevitable.'²³

The first of those ugly moments came at night after several camps had been established on the ridge. Perry recalled:

That night, at 16 minutes past midnight, our strong conviction that we were on a safe route took a mortal blow. About 60 metres above camp 1.8 a complex of windslabs sheared off to a depth of about two metres. The afternoon snows had done their damage. In an instant, camp 1.8 disintegrated. The entire snow cave slid off and the tent, which was firmly tied to the fixed rope, was shredded.

In Camp 2 [a crevasse camp], 250 metres below, Toyota [the teams of four climbers each were named after major sponsors] was awakened by a freight-train roar as the outside two metres of their slope was sheared off and cascaded to the glacier 800 metres below. Graeme Dingle's crampons at the feet of his sleeping bag, attached by rope to a snowstake outside, were whipped out into the night never to be seen again.²⁴

A day or two later, Perry's team returned to the mountain to replace the climbers that had narrowly escaped the big avalanche. 'In the now thoroughly unwelcome afternoon snowstorm, we crossed paths with Toyota on the fixed ropes. They looked drawn, the dark rings under their eyes telling their story more eloquently than words.'²⁵

²³ Perry, M. 1986, 'Qomolungma 1985', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 39, pp. 49–56.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Two members of Perry's team were the Australians Rheinberger and Allen. Their task was to push the route up to camp three and then beyond. While the two Australians did the lead climbing, Perry and Warwick Anderson set about making camp three as safe as possible by digging a snow cave deep into the slope to eventually replace the tents. Still, it was a dangerous site, and no matter how careful Rheinberger and Allen were in climbing above, there was a good chance they would trigger another slab avalanche (see image 16.7). In fact, as Perry pointed out, another slide was almost predictable:

As it happened the events of the following day were even more grotesque than we had feared. That next morning, 10 September, Peter and Mike climbed the 150 metre slope above the camp. As predicted, a slab a thousand metres wide and up to two metres deep broke off beneath their feet. Also as predicted, they avoided being swept down in the debris, which did run right over the camp. And Warwick and I happened to be in residence.

The sound of the slab break, when it came, was soft, understated, and almost marvellous in the way its terminal message was so gently delivered—a shout from Peter Allen arriving milliseconds later was utterly superfluous. Warwick, and I were well advanced at least mentally in our lunge for survival. He dashed into his incipient snowcave and I followed, honing in on the sound of his voice instants before it all came down over the top.

We were buried. The camp, of course, was devastated. In the filled-in cave we were immobile, our heads together in a small air cavity, facing the prospect of impending suffocation with minds of an orderly demeanour and lungs that were definitely over-excited, until Warwick managed to straighten up one arm and punch it through the surface. His red-gloved hand enabled the others to find us.

We were soon dug out and shortly afterwards reported wryly to our much relieved leader, Austin Brookes, who had witnessed the avalanche from Camp 1, that not only had we failed to reach a Camp 4 site, but had accidentally demolished Camp 3 as well. In turn we were informed that the main body of the slide had swept right down to the glacier thousands of metres below, had swept across it and then collided with the lower few hundred metres of the slopes of Khumbutse opposite. We had been lucky our cave wasn't sheared off with it.²⁶

That avalanche put a definitive end to the attempt on the West Ridge. The team was not, however, ready to call it quits yet. They shifted their attack to the massive North Face—the one the first Australian Mt Everest expedition had climbed 12 months earlier.

26 Ibid.

In 1985, however, conditions on the North Face were very different. Shaun Norman, another of the very experienced New Zealand climbers, observed that ‘day after day big ones [avalanches] peeled down the Great Couloir and blasted the Australians’ route’.²⁷ The incessant avalanches had changed the mood of the trip. Perry said:

Black humour abounded, the landscape glowered, and because avalanches had become a twenty-four-hour-a-day phenomenon, sleep was never quite relaxed. A sharp cry or the roar of an avalanche always produced an involuntary cringe and quickening of breath in me, and judging by the number of heads anxiously popping out of tents at such moments, I was not alone.²⁸

The group tried to climb a route up a smooth snow slope between the North Ridge and the Australian Great Couloir route, but if anything, the avalanche risk had worsened. The experience of Mike Rheinberger and Warwick Anderson, climbing at about 7000 m, was illustrative. According to Perry, they ‘had windslab cracks open up below, level with, and above them when they were descending from Camp 3 after a snowfall. Fortunately, nothing moved—they would have had no run-out.’²⁹

A few more close calls and the North Face route was abandoned. Perry expressed the feelings of the team: ‘By now the expedition had escaped fatal accidents so many times that it made our heads spin—surely we should accept our luck and walk away alive.’³⁰ There was, however, still one more session of avalanche cheating before they eventually returned to the Antipodes. Five of the climbers mounted a last-ditch effort to get up the North Ridge but were again turned back at about 7000 m—this time by a severe early winter storm.

The 1985 New Zealand Everest expedition was a most sobering experience for all involved. It is a classic example of the old adage that mountaineers do not conquer mountains, rather it is the mountain that decides when it will be climbed and by whom. The best of New Zealand’s considerably skilled alpine climbers could not get much above 7000 m.

The two Australians, Rheinberger and Allen, acquitted themselves very well. Both climbed strongly and did not flinch in the face of very high risk. Indeed, Rheinberger reached the high point on all three attempts—the only climber on the expedition to do so.

27 Norman, S. 1985, ‘Qomolungma retrospective, or “I’m looking backward to Tibet”’, *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, December, pp. 9–10.

28 Perry, ‘Qomolungma 1985’.

29 *Ibid.*

30 *Ibid.*

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Finally, at least two of the ABEE participants had obtained some high-altitude experience. Although none of the attempts got much above 7000 m, collectively, they represented a considerable amount of experience in climbing in harsh and dangerous conditions. The other ABEE climbers would need more such experience. So, the next year, more returned to the high mountains of Asia, and this time it was the turn of the AAA component of the team to rub noses with one of the giants of the Himalaya.

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