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Training on the big ones

It was 1986, six years since Pat Cullinan led his Perth-based Special Air Service (SAS) troops to Nepal for the attempt on Gauri Shankar. During that time, his colleagues in the eastern states had made considerable progress in their preparations for Everest. They had climbed Denali in Alaska in addition to several trekking peaks in Nepal. Nilgiri North was a real achievement—a 7000 m peak and by a reasonably difficult route. Just as Tim Macartney-Snape, Lincoln Hall and their fellow climbers found in the early 1980s, what they really needed before Everest, however, was a hard climb on an 8000 m peak—or something very close to it. And Everest was only two years away.

The Army Alpine Association (AAA) high-altitude test was to be Broad Peak, one of the world's 14 giants of more than 8000 m. Located in the spectacular Karakoram Range of Pakistan, Broad Peak is 8047 m high and is considered one of the more straightforward of the 8000-ers—at least technically. Nevertheless, it would severely test the climbers' stamina and ability to cope with extreme altitudes and, as many mountaineers had earlier found on Broad Peak, the long summit ridge was not exactly a doddle.

Cullinan was the leader of the 14-man Broad Peak expedition, which included most of the AAA Everest aspirants. Cullinan's deputy was Brian Agnew, who was the climbing leader of the 1981 Ganesh IV expedition and had participated in the 1982 farce on Peak 29 organised by the British Army. Other experienced AAA climbers included Zac Zaharias, a veteran of trips to Ganesh IV, Denali, Nilgiri North and Papsura; Peter Lambert, who had led the 1984 Annapurna Sanctuary expedition in addition to climbing Denali and Nilgiri North; and Jim Truscott, a foundation member of the AAA and a survivor of the Ganesh IV avalanche. They were joined by Terry McCullagh, another Nilgiri North veteran, and Rick Moor, Derek Murphy, Mick Pezet and Jim van Gelder—all of whom had been on trips to Nepalese trekking

peaks. Tony Delaney was the expedition's doctor and Norm Crookston the base camp manager—coopted at short notice from an AAA trek in the Baltoro region at the same time.

The strength of the team was boosted considerably by the addition of two civilian mountaineers: Mike Rheinberger and Jonathan Chester. The inclusion of civilians in an AAA expedition followed the examples set by the Nilgiri North and Ganesh IV expeditions and was another vital step in building the rapport between civilian and military climbers that was necessary for success on Everest. In addition, van Gelder, an Army Reservist, had established links of his own as he was just coming off a civilian expedition to Kangchenjunga, the world's third-highest mountain. That experience had given him a very valuable taste of climbing at high altitude.

Rheinberger, who had been very active throughout the 1980s, was easily the most experienced Himalayan mountaineer of the team (see image 17.1). He had climbed Dharamsura and Changabang, had been very close to the summits of Kwangde and Kangguru and had climbed high on Nanda Devi and Everest.

Chester had been on two previous Himalayan expeditions—ironically, both to Annapurna III in central Nepal. The first was the ill-fated 1980 trip, in which three of his colleagues were killed in an avalanche and a fourth, Faye Kerr, died in India shortly after the expedition. The second, three years later, was rather more successful.

Another of the 1980 team, Steve McDowell, joined Chester in the 1983 attempt. The small group was completed by Adrian Teague, a civil engineer; David Wagland, a geologist; and Steve Bunton, a former teacher—all of whom were on their first mountaineering expedition to the Himalaya. Bunton, however, was no stranger to abseiling and climbing up ropes, as he was one of Australia's most experienced cavers. The caving techniques would undoubtedly prove useful on the fixed ropes, but Annapurna III was about to deal out treatment he could scarcely have imagined in the depths of caves.

With the tragedies of 1980 still somewhat fresh in their minds, Chester and McDowell took their team to the other side of Annapurna III, to the South-West Face. It was a route steeper and more difficult than the north side but one less likely to hold large amounts of snow and thus less likely to send avalanches roaring down the slopes. Access was easier too, as the approach was from Pokhara via the very popular Annapurna Sanctuary trek.

Progress on the lower slopes leading to the South-West Face was initially rapid, but then freakish, heavy post-monsoon snowstorms suddenly made the climbing very treacherous. It appeared that the gods of Annapurna III had singled out Chester and McDowell for another dose of nasty treatment. In a rather frightening repeat of the 1980 experience, avalanches began tumbling down. Chester described one as

‘a great wave of snow that came down’,¹ while another buried their tent, which was supposedly tucked safely under a rock overhang. They managed to dig out of that one and descend to base camp, lucky to be alive.

The team persevered, however, and with time running short, mounted one concerted push towards the summit after the series of storms had abated. Bunton described the difficulty of ploughing back up through the deep, newly fallen snow to re-establish the higher camps.

Ever known you were waking up to the worst day of your life? Four men in a dome tent. The chill breeze blowing as we make our 3 am start. After the cramped chaos we moved quickly up to the end of the trodden trench. The onerous task of breaking trail took us 13½ hours before Camp II was reached. It took a further three hours to excavate and re-erect them. Tomorrow would probably be worse, we thought, as we crashed into our sleeping bags, and we were right. After a whole day’s battle we only ascended 400 m of fixed rope and regained the ridge which led to Camp III. A day later the camp was similarly resurrected from beneath the deep snow.²

After regaining camp four, located in a bergschrund at the base of the upper face, Chester, Bunton, McDowell and Teague made another 3am start for the final push to the summit. They climbed the rest of the face, but it took longer than they had anticipated. Bunton decided to retreat to camp four, while Chester, McDowell and Teague pressed on. They were forced to bivouac, however, at the top of the face. It turned out to be a harrowing night as they could not get their stove to work and so were forced to survive, in a severely dehydrated state, for about 24 hours without fluids. To top it off, Chester had spilled some kerosene on his gloves while he was fiddling with the stove and heat loss from the evaporating fluid caused frostbite in his hands. Teague also suffered frostbite, but to his feet.

In the morning, the climbers were forced to descend. Although the summit was only a few hundred metres away up a gently angled ridge, it would have been most foolhardy to continue in their dehydrated, frostbitten state. Their ordeal, on the other hand, was not quite over.

At camp four, their much-needed rest was suddenly interrupted by large thunderheads that rose from the valleys, drifted onto the mountain and began belting the South-West Face with more snow. As the night wore on, small avalanches began to hit the tent. About 11pm, Bunton and his colleagues, who had taken sleeping tablets to ensure a night’s rest, were forced to abandon the camp and start climbing down in the dark. Bunton recalled the epic retreat:

1 Sheridan, G. 1984, ‘The icy hell of Annapurna’, *The Bulletin*, 21 February 1984, pp. 49–54.

2 Bunton, S. 1984, ‘Annapurna III’, *Action Outdoor*, August/September, pp. 40–5.

No longer was spindrift hitting the tent, it was now being covered in a sound-proof coating of fresh-fallen snow. It was 10:30 pm and we were slowly being buried. At 11:30 we decided to abandon camp. At 12:30 we quit the tents as small avalanches began to fill us in. We could only rescue one tent and left the other to be buried. On the tail of the fixed rope we abandoned Camp IV flinging ourselves down the face clipped into a cows-tail and karabiner.

Re-establishing ourselves on our feet we found ourselves soloing down the steep, treacherous slopes to Camp III. We fought to proceed into the teeth of the blizzard, snowflakes stinging our eyes and faces, the cold numbing noses and worsening the frostbite injuries sustained the previous night. The most frightening prospect was the squeaky snow upon which we trod. We were in grave danger of setting off the whole slope in one all-consuming avalanche. We climbed as nimbly as possible but with the others full of sleeping pills, I felt as though I was herding a group of zombies.³

The exhausted climbers managed to battle through the combined effects of darkness, blizzard and sleeping tablets to get off the mountain safely. This time they had escaped Annapurna III, and indeed had climbed the South-West Face and had reached 7300 m, only a short distance from the top.

Chester brought more than just the experience of his two Annapurna III trips to the 1986 Broad Peak expedition. Having made several journeys to Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic islands, he was no stranger to the harsh conditions of a Himalayan 8000 m peak. On his trip to Heard Island during the 1982–83 summer, Chester climbed Big Ben, the highest mountain on Australian territory—an adventure that had all the ingredients of a Himalayan climb apart from the altitude.

If the Annapurna III trip was a rugged warm-up to an 8000 m peak for Chester, the attempt on Kangchenjunga early in 1986 was a real eye-opener for the relatively inexperienced Jim van Gelder, a doctor interested in high-altitude medicine as well as mountaineering.

Unlike nearly all other Australian Himalayan mountaineers, van Gelder made the jump directly from rock climbing to the high Himalaya without the normal period of apprenticeship in the Southern Alps of New Zealand. He was very much a do-it-yourself climber, first learning rock climbing at age fifteen on the crags around Canberra by ‘reading about it in a book and then going out and doing it myself’.⁴ Years later, he met the AAA’s Rick Moor, who was organising a trip to Nepal, and talked his way on as the expedition doctor. That was the expedition in the post-monsoon season of 1985 that climbed Pisang Peak and Chulu West, two trekking peaks north of the Annapurna Himal.

³ Ibid.

⁴ J. van Gelder, Interview.

To go from a trekking peak to the world's third-highest mountain was probably an even bigger jump than going from rock climbing to a trekking peak, but van Gelder was undaunted by the prospect of tackling Kangchenjunga (8598 m) when he received a last-minute invitation from Mike Groom. With attempts on Trisul and Annapurna II under his belt, Groom was the most experienced climber of his small team. The others were Shane Chemello and Chris Frost, both on their first Himalayan expedition, and van Gelder's friend James Strohfeldt, who had also been on the 1985 Pisang/Chulu trip.

So, among the five there were only three Himalayan expeditions to their credit and Groom was the only one to have climbed to 7000 m. That lack of experience, combined with the very short lead time of six months to organise the trip (Groom picked up the permit when Peter Hillary had to cancel his planned expedition), meant that Kangchenjunga was an even bigger challenge than it ordinarily would have been. Not surprisingly, things began to go awry from the start.

The walk-in became somewhat of an epic when early season snows and a dearth of able-bodied porters, due to a lack of money to pay them, forced team members to shuttle loads for two and a half weeks just to get to get to base camp. Despite that delay, good progress was made early on the mountain and two camps were quickly established and stocked with another round of load carrying. The climbers were attempting the South-West Face of Kangchenjunga, which was not a particularly difficult route but was rather long and would force the climbers to spend a long period above 7000 m. Before they could gain the upper reaches of the mountain, however, and make an attempt on the summit, a series of storms, with heavy snowfalls and the consequent avalanche danger, forced them back down to base camp.

Normally a spell at base camp could be a relaxing, recuperative time of rest and good food, but for the Kangchenjunga team it was almost the opposite. Their cook, Trising, was a rather active chap with a morbid curiosity. One day he dug up a grave near the mess tent and the climbers, wandering in for a meal, were confronted with 'the uncovered outline of a body steaming in the hot sun', Groom said. 'Trising seemed quite pleased with his find as he poked it with a stick. I turned away, followed by Trising, who ran after me with his hands clamped firmly over his nose and mouth.'⁵

Remains of dead climbers notwithstanding, the mess tent was not a very pleasant place anyway, as van Gelder recalled: 'Due to our financial straits, we had only lentils and rice, and someone had spilled kerosene in the cooking oil so we had kero-flavoured fried rice for meal after meal. There was a bit of flour left too so on occasion we had some kerosene-flavoured chapattis as well.'⁶

5 Groom, M. 1986, 'Himalayan apprenticeship', *Wild*, no. 22 (Spring), pp. 55–6.

6 J. van Gelder, Interview.

After a lengthy stay at base camp, morale had dropped. Strohfeldt summed it up: 'we were under-financed, under-experienced, under-led and under a hell of a lot of snow.'⁷

When the storms cleared, there was still plenty of time to climb the mountain before the monsoon set in; however, money and food had virtually run out so mid-May was set as the date the porters would return and the expedition would leave the mountain. With that sort of constraint, there was time for only one more attempt on the summit.

In conditions not unlike Chester and his team faced in their last-ditch attempt on Annapurna III, Groom, Chemello and van Gelder forced their way through deep snow to re-establish camps one and two and then pushed higher to set up two more camps, the highest at 7000 m. From there, the three launched their bid for the top of Kangchenjunga.

Chemello and van Gelder set personal altitude records, but it was Groom who came closest to the summit:

I made good progress without a pack on my back and soon found myself at the bottom of the Gangway, a gully that leads almost to the summit, and normally containing bare ice. I found the ice covered by 30 centimetres of snow, which slowed my progress on the Gangway. I left my empty water bottle at 8,000 metres and continued, barely managing 10 or 15 steps between rests. When I reached 8,200 metres the summit started to disappear in cloud, but I slowly made my way up to the 8,400 metre level. It was 2:30 pm and I had to leave the Gangway to traverse right across mixed ground to the summit. I was so near to the summit but my will power and strength were almost gone. I made a few more steps, rested, then a few more, before stopping to think what I should do. Clouds raced past and the wind was blowing snow in all directions. I pulled my head in tight to cover my mouth and headed down. I had expected that it would be easier going down but I still had to stop for regular rests.

About an hour down the Gangway I stopped to look back up. The summit was clear and calm.⁸

Considering the size of the mountain and the relative inexperience of the team, it was a tremendous effort. Groom narrowly missed getting to the top of Kangchenjunga and van Gelder climbed past the magic 8000 m mark—in fact, to about 8200 m, which was higher than the summit of Broad Peak. He would not have to wait long for the chance to repeat that feat. Just three and a half weeks after returning to Australia from the Kangchenjunga trip, van Gelder was on an airplane heading for Pakistan and the great Karakoram Range with the AAA Broad Peak expedition.

7 J. Strohfeldt, Interview.

8 Groom, 'Himalayan apprenticeship'.

Pakistan and the Karakoram were a new experience for all of the Broad Peak expedition members; their previous Himalayan climbing trips had been to the Nepalese, Indian or Tibetan segments of the range. Containing four of the world's 8000 m peaks, the Karakoram is arguably the Himalaya's most spectacular group of mountains. It features not only a wild array of massive snow and ice-covered peaks—Chogolisa, Skyang Kangri, Baltoro Kangri (Golden Throne) and the Masherbrum and Gasherbrum groups—but a liberal sprinkling of the most steep and apparently impregnable granite spires, walls and battlements to be found outside Patagonia: Lobsang Spire, Mustagh Tower and the great Trango Tower. Presiding over this most marvellous of mountain scenes is K2, the world's second-highest peak and a mountain more difficult to climb and more beautiful to look on than Everest.

Broad Peak stands near the centre of the Karakoram Range, next to K2 and not far from Hidden Peak and Gasherbrum II, the other 8000 m peaks. Access to Broad Peak and the central Karakoram is via the Braldu Gorge and Baltoro Glacier, an arduous trek but surely one of the most magnificent mountain walks anywhere in the world.

Before the Australian Broad Peak aspirants could begin their journey into the heart of the Karakoram, they had to get through Pakistani bureaucracy, get to Skardu and the trailhead and then organise porters. The first task proved somewhat tricky, as Rheinberger recalled:

In Rawalpindi we were quartered at the famous Flashmans Hotel, a comfortable old establishment growing used to the peculiar demands of a mountaineering expedition. While there we packed the food, carefully organised by Mick Pezet in Australia. With the fierce heat of Pakistan, Mick's pride and joy, viz three legs of pork, did not survive. Needless to say, it required great tact to dispose of those stinking parcels in Muslim Pakistan.⁹

Another problem arose at the trail head. With 1986 a record year for the number of expeditions to K2 and the Karakoram in general, there was a dearth of able-bodied porters to carry gear up the Baltoro. A bit of Australian resourcefulness solved the problem, however, as Cullinan commandeered some time on Radio Pakistan to broadcast his plea and he and Chester scoured about 20 local villages in search of porters. It was a solution typical of the AAA Broad Peak expedition, which turned out to be a particularly well-organised outfit. Little did they realise at the start of the walk-in that their organisational skills and medical supplies would literally be lifesavers. It was to be the most tragic season in Karakoram mountaineering.

⁹ M. Rheinberger in Cullinan, P. 1987, *Report of the Army Alpine Association Broad Peak (8047 metres) expedition, Pakistan, 28 June to 7 September 1986*, Report no. R852-5-2, Australian Army Alpine Association, Canberra.

Aussie resourcefulness came to the fore again on arrival at Broad Peak base camp. An early courtesy call to K2 base camp was quickly followed by what Cullinan called

deviously planned foraging expeditions...A captured elaborate Spanish tent which could fit up to 20 persons became our luxurious dining area in which we could dine on exotic captured items such as German sausage, smoked oysters, pate, biscuits, herring, Korean tea, chocolate and Spanish olives. It's a wonder we ever got onto the mountain!¹⁰

The scavenged gear was obtained from the dumps left behind by other expeditions. No doubt the results of the raids were a great relief to van Gelder, who a couple of months earlier had, at Kangchenjunga base camp, been forced to subsist on a diet of kerosene-flavoured fried rice.

The Aussie resourcefulness in obtaining food from K2 base camp dumps was perhaps born of necessity. Several climbers commented later on the paucity of food on the Broad Peak trip. In fact, Peter Lambert said, 'This was the first expedition I had been on where I actually lost weight before I reached base camp! Without the scrounging we would have definitely run out of base camp food and have had to leave well before we could climb the mountain.'¹¹

Despite the problems with food, the team did get onto the mountain and made steady progress up the bulky peak. They approached the climb in the more traditional siege style, with four camps placed successively higher up the West Face/Ridge route, a moderately angled route used by most parties on Broad Peak. The climbing was carefully organised and executed, with two teams of mountaineers alternating (see images 17.2 and 17.3), one in the lead and the other stocking the previously established camps. Shortly after camp four was put in at 7500 m high on the face, one of the teams—consisting of Zaharias, Agnew, McCullagh, van Gelder, Truscott and Lambert—was at the camp in position for a summit attempt. Cullinan, Rheinberger, Chester, Delaney, Murphy and Pezet were in residence at camp three at 7100 m.

Early on the morning of 16 August, a clear but particularly cold morning, the higher team set out for the summit, following German climber Michel Dacher, who was on the same route and had, in fact, spent the night with the Australians. The cold was intense and McCullagh and Truscott, who retreated from their early morning start, were back at camp four when Rheinberger and Chester, moving up from below, arrived. The pair set out again with their colleagues from camp three, but again Truscott was forced to retire from the summit bid when he felt too tired and lethargic to continue.

¹⁰ Cullinan, *Report of the Army Alpine Association Broad Peak (8047 metres) expedition*.

¹¹ P. Lambert, Interview.

Rheinberger and Chester, joined also by Cullinan from camp three, continued on through camp four to push on towards the top themselves. They discovered that all of the interesting climbing on Broad Peak was near the summit, as Rheinberger recounted:

The route from Camp 4 towards the Col skirted an evil looking crevasse and then took a straightforward line up an ever steepening snow slope. Beneath the col the last 100 m was quite steep, perhaps 50 degrees near the top, until Jonathan Chester, Pat Cullinan and I emerged onto the summit ridge, the border of Pakistan and China, and a splendid view over the western Sinkiang plains...

The summit ridge reared dramatically towards the south...By now it was mid-afternoon and the weather was clear and settled—a beautiful day. To the southwest some light cloud was visible but there appeared no real threat for the time being.

The summit ridge was steep and dangerous in places with a dramatic drop of 2,500 m on the Chinese side, sometimes corniced, and a mixture of broken rock and softish, unconsolidated snow. In places, remnants of old fixed rope had to be carefully tested before any reliance was placed on them.

As I moved along this ridge, an appreciation of my situation sank in. Here, above 8,000 m on a perfect day feeling good—a great thrill.

The day wore on and I began to meet returning climbers—firstly Michel Dacher, then Zac Zaharias, who was the first of our group to the top, Terry McCullagh, who made a very fast trip, Peter Lambert and Brian Agnew.

After about 3 hours, I neared the true summit. Ahead slightly were Jonathan and Jim van Gelder and a German couple. Behind were Pat and Karl [another of the German climbers]. The Gasherbrums directly ahead. Chogolisa, Masherbrum and far to the west, the huge bulk of Nanga Parbat.

On the top congratulations and photographs as Pat Cullinan joined us. Then the prospect of a long descent. It was now almost 6:30 pm and Karl was still about 200 m from the top.¹²

The last statement gives little hint of the epic about to unfold. Karl Fassnacht, the German climber, never made the summit. In fact, he very nearly did not return from Broad Peak. If it had not been for a decision made by Pat Cullinan a few days earlier, Fassnacht would undoubtedly have perished on the summit ridge.

Cullinan and his team-mates were confronted with a dilemma common to mountaineers facing a very long summit day and possible bivouac. If they took enough gear to ensure a safe and relatively comfortable bivouac, the excess weight would likely slow them enough that they would be forced to bivouac. It would

12 Rheinberger, M. 1987, 'Broad Peak 1986', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 40, pp. 91–2.

become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If, however, they travelled as light as possible to optimise speed and thus avoid a night out, they would be in dire straits if some unforeseen event forced them to bivouac.

All but Cullinan of the Australian Broad Peak climbers opted to travel lightly on the summit day. ‘We took virtually nothing the summit day,’ Zaharias said, ‘and we had a “turn-around time”. Either we made it by that time or we came down. But Pat was going to climb Broad Peak. He took an enormous pack: bivvy bag, gas stove, everything under the sun.’¹³

Cullinan’s performance was a harbinger of things to come on Everest. Showing a fierce determination to keep on going no matter what obstacles were thrown in his way, Cullinan plugged away and by the end of the day was on the summit of Broad Peak (see image 17.4). He was the last of the Australians to make the top, but he got there. And, his decision to haul up full bivouac gear—a rather questionable decision according to conventional mountaineering wisdom—proved to be a lifesaving one for Fassnacht. Cullinan takes up the story:

I had been climbing continuously from 5.30am to 6pm, when I reached the summit. I started descending about 6.30pm. About 200 m from the summit, I met Karl Fassnacht, one of the German climbers. He seemed to be in a bad way, but we couldn’t communicate as I spoke no German and he spoke no English.

He turned around and started back with me. The rest of his team had left him. He was a good climber, so the other Germans assumed he would be able to get off the mountain himself.

We were only 400 m from the top when it started to get dark. At that point the summit ridge is very narrow with big drops on either side. He stopped and began to clear an area. I was trying to get him to keep moving, to get us off the mountain as fast as we could, but he wouldn’t budge.

Luckily I found a hole along the ridge. We spent the night there sitting on our packs. Ironically, I learned a week later from the German expedition leader that Karl’s pack was filled with warm clothing. He didn’t put any of it on during the night!¹⁴

Meanwhile, the absence of Cullinan and Fassnacht was causing some worry, as Rheinberger reported:

Chester, van Gelder and I waited at the Col until, after two hours, we concluded that the pair had bivouaced or that a disaster had overtaken them. Either way we were best advised to return to Camp IV, which we did late in the evening. Chester and van Gelder, feeling poorly, continued to Camp III while I decided to wait at Camp IV.¹⁵

13 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

14 P. Cullinan, Interview.

15 M. Rheinberger in Cullinan, *Report of the Army Alpine Association Broad Peak (8047 metres) expedition*.

Cullinan continued:

The next day, we descended to the col at 7800 m. There I boiled some water and we waited for a few hours. He couldn't eat or drink; he was in a very bad way. I then had no choice but to start lowering him in his bivvy bag down the mountain as a dead weight.¹⁶

Fortunately, late in the day, the German leader, Sigi Hupfauer, and Rheinberger, who had been waiting at camp four and who had heard Cullinan's shouts, arrived and helped Cullinan get Fassnacht down to camp four. There, Rheinberger administered dexamethazone (a treatment for pulmonary oedema) to Fassnacht, who was suffering badly. The next day, they all reached camp three, where Tony Delaney administered oxygen to Fassnacht and rendered further medical attention. A storm kept the climbers pinned at camp three for two more days before they completed the descent, reaching base camp on 22 August after spending a further night at camp two.

There is little doubt that Pat Cullinan saved Karl Fassnacht's life and in doing so he put his own life at considerable risk. Had a storm arisen while the pair was bivvied on the summit ridge, they would have been in deep trouble. Cullinan was later awarded the Star of Courage medal for his rescue.

The rescue of Fassnacht was not the first time the well-equipped and organised Australians, particularly their very competent doctor, Tony Delaney, came to the aid of stricken climbers. Earlier a pair of Yugoslav climbers, on the same route on Broad Peak, received oxygen and other medical help from Delaney at camp one after they returned from the summit suffering frostbite, dehydration and exhaustion. They were subsequently looked after at the Australian base camp for a fortnight until they could be evacuated by helicopter.

Delaney also came to the aid of Jonathan Chester at base camp. 'Jonathan was suffering from severe colic,' Brian Agnew recalled. 'He was in the tent next to us. He'd take air into his stomach and then belch it back up. He was in a very bad way. Delaney gave him a few jabs and sorted him out. Tony probably saved him.'¹⁷

Chester also had problems earlier on the descent from camp four to camp three. Suffering from dehydration and altitude sickness, he tripped and slid down the snow slope towards ice cliffs. Fortunately, he was able to self-arrest in time. Peter Lambert then administered an injection of dexamethasone, as Rheinberger had done for Fassnacht.

¹⁶ P. Cullinan, Interview.

¹⁷ B. Agnew, Interview.

The biggest problems, however, were not occurring on Broad Peak but on neighbouring K2. During the summer of 1986, one of the most amazing sagas in Himalayan climbing history was unfolding on the world's second-highest mountain. Twenty-seven climbers—a record—scaled K2 during that season, but just as the triumphs were mounting up, so too was a series of mountaineering tragedies of truly horrible dimensions. Thirteen climbers lost their lives on K2 and the circumstances surrounding many of the deaths triggered a barrage of criticism, second-guessing and soul-searching among the Himalayan climbing community.

First, two Americans were killed by an avalanche, followed by the disappearance of a French husband-and-wife team high on the mountain. A Pole fell from the Abruzzi Ridge after reaching the summit via the South Face and one of his countrymen, on the South–South-West Ridge, plunged to his death when he abseiled off the end of a fixed rope. A local high-altitude porter was killed by a rock fall. Perhaps most tragically of all, Italian solo climber Renato Casarotto died minutes from safety when he fell into a crevasse near base camp.

Worse was to come. As if K2 were exacting one final, horrible price from a climbing community already reeling from disaster, six experienced mountaineers of three nationalities, including well-known Britons Julie Tullis and Alan Rouse, perished high on the Abruzzi Ridge in a bizarre combination of events: makeshift partnerships, haphazard logistical arrangements, muddled communication, misguided ambition and misjudged weather conditions.

Experienced British climber Jim Curran, who chronicled the events in his excellent book *K2, Triumph and Tragedy*, was at K2 base camp throughout the season. When Austrians Willie Bauer and Kurt Diemberger stumbled off the Abruzzi Ridge as the only survivors of the final tragedy, Curran was almost too overwhelmed by the latest shocks to be of much help.

Providentially, Delaney and Rheinberger were on their way to K2 base camp just at the right time. Curran described their arrival:

At last to my relief, figures, like the cavalry at the end of a western, appeared on the horizon. Thank God. It proved to be members of the Australian Army Broad Peak expedition, whom I had met before. They had come up to K2 Base Camp to find out the latest news. They couldn't have timed it better. They had brought materials for an improvised stretcher. They were calm, capable and confident.¹⁸

British climber Don Whillans once said of an expedition doctor, during a trip to the Gangotri region of India, 'Expedition doctors are either good doctors and lousy climbers or lousy doctors and good climbers. This bloke is neither.'¹⁹ Tony Delaney,

18 Curran, J. 1989, *K2, Triumph and Tragedy*, Grafton Books, London, p. 157.

19 D. Whillans in Child, G. 1988, *Thin Air, Encounters in the Himalayas*, Patrick Stephens, Wellingborough, England, p. 23.

on the other hand, was very competent at both. If ever there was an expedition doctor who deserved as much credit as the climbers, it was Delaney, who provided some much-needed emergency medical aid in the upper Baltoro in 1986.

Injury, illness and death in the Karakoram: excerpts from the diary of an expedition doctor

Tony Delaney

FRI 27 JUN: I had left my sports medicine practice at 1700, Charlotte Pass, in the Snowy Mountains and drove to Sydney, arriving early am.

SAT 28 JUN: Final immunisations administered to various team members at Mascot Airport.

WED 2 JUL: We proceed by 'Magic Bus' to Gilgit and Skardu—22 hours on the Karakoram Highway, a masterpiece of engineering which requires the distribution of a few anti-nauseants. Those team members who ate injudiciously from road-side stalls also required anti-nauseants, plus fluids and metronidazole.

SAT 12 JUL: Contestants in the Himalaya Super Marathon pass through, mostly in good shape and hydration, with some obviously feeling the effects of moderate altitude. I made a 10 km run with the women's 50 mile world record holder and enjoy the benefit of one extra week's acclimatisation to 8,500 ft.

[Delaney was part of a rear party bringing up supplies left behind due to a delay in obtaining porters.]

MON 14 JUL: Rest of porters arrive and we set out to rejoin the team. I commenced a regular evening sick parade, before dinner, which enabled us to treat porters early, and keep tabs on the unfit. This proved of great value to the porters' morale and helped prevent porters' strikes which are the bane of any expedition and usually are timed with the skill of a pre-Christmas brewery strike.

FRI 18 JUL: Proceed to Paiju. The last stand of trees for 80 km. The number of treks and expeditions going into Karakoram, allied with no latrine or garbage dumps, leads to faeces and rubbish being scattered all over an otherwise lovely area.

MON 21 JUL: Move over Baltoro glacier toward Concordia. The incidence of altitude headaches amongst porters climbs to 40%. Aspirin dispensed plentifully.

THU 24 JUL: Large avalanche down the central gully of Broad Peak sent Jonathan Chester and Mike Rheinberger into a spring. They also find the body of a German-Canadian, who died in an avalanche 3 years previously. The glacier disgorged him. He was subsequently reburied by Jim Truscott and Derek Murphy.

SUN 27 JUL: I carry a leaking jerry can of kero to Camp 1 and feel nauseous all the way. I wondered how much was due to altitude and how much due to the kero!

WED 30 JUL: Load carry to Camp 2. Depart Camp 2 at 1150. Await a Yugoslav climber, Rado, at Camp 1 who is suffering from dehydration and 3 degree frostbite to his fingertips. Rehydrate him with 2–3 litres of fluids, apply oxygen by mask. Descend with him to Base Camp and dress his frostbite.

FRI 1 AUG: Hike up to K2 Base Camp, conversations with Austrians, Koreans, Brits. 3 Koreans, Alan Rouse, Kurt Diemberger, Willie Bauer, Julie Tullis, two Austrians and a Polish woman hope to reach K2 summit in 2–3 days. Voytek, a Pole, falls off the end of a fixed rope to his death during a night descent.

SUN 3 AUG: 3 Korean climbers attain summit of K2.

MON 4 AUG: Al Rouse, Julie Tullis, Kurt Diemberger, Willie Bauer and another Austrian summit K2.

TUE 5 AUG: Weather deteriorates, two Yugoslavs missing on Broad Peak.

WED 6 AUG: 2 Polish climbers reach K2 Base Camp after an epic 4 day descent.

THU 7 AUG: Yugoslav rescue party returns with its two missing members. We treat them for mild frostbite and dehydration.

HIMALAYAN DREAMING

SAT 9 AUG: 7 still missing on K2.

TUE 12 AUG: Willie Bauer regains K2 Base Camp after a terrible 8 days at over 8000 m.

WED 13 AUG: Mike Rheinberger and myself go to K2 Base Camp. Kurt Diemberger is in very poor condition at Advanced Base Camp. I organise porters, Dr Jong of the Korean expedition, and skis, climbing rope and a sleeping bag. We ascend the Godwin-Austen glacier to meet Diemberger and carry him back to K2 Base Camp, where we dress his frostbitten hands and feet and rehydrate him.

THU 14 AUG: Bauer and Diemberger much better. Awaiting helicopter evacuation. We have given up hope for remaining group on K2. I climb to Camp 2 [on Broad Peak].

SAT 16 AUG: Zac, Jim van Gelder, Peter Lambert, Brian Agnew, Terry McCullagh, Pat Cullinan, Jonathan Chester, Mike Rheinberger reach summit. Pat Cullinan encounters Karl, a German climber who is suffering high altitude cerebral oedema on the summit ridge of Broad Peak (8000 metres +). Pat has extreme difficulty in communicating to a non-English speaking German with scrambled thinking (due to HACE) and they bivouac out. Pat leads him down to the saddle.

SUN 17 AUG: Most of the team return to Camp 3. I send Mick Pezet and Terry McCullagh down to Camp 2 as they are showing increasing signs of mountain sickness. Sigi Hupfauer and Mike Rheinberger remain at Camp 4 to help Pat and Karl.

Zac, Jim Truscott and myself remain at Camp 3 to help re-hydrate and treat descending climbers before they continue back to base camp. Pat and Karl [assisted by Hupfauer and Rheinberger] struggle into Camp 4 at 2300, by which time we were alarmed about their chances of survival.

MON 18 AUG: Sigi, Pat, Mike, Karl reach Camp 3. I re-hydrate Karl, give him 100% oxygen by mask and IM Dexamethasone. Karl was being dragged by the others but was able to stagger onwards with oxygen mask.

[There is no entry for 19 August. Rheinberger notes: 'We were forced to spend an extra day at camp three. I left camp three on the 20th, reaching base camp on the 21st. Tony and Pat may have stayed the night of the 20th at camp three, reaching camp one on the 21st.']

WED 20 AUG: A fierce storm at Camp 3 causes some concern, but Karl continues to improve with more rest, warmth and fluids.

THU 21 AUG: We break out from Camp 3 despite a continuing storm, as we don't wish to share the fate of the K2 dead. After 6 days at 7100 metres I am starting to acclimatise, with much improved sleep patterns and strength. Pat is very tired from his efforts, having undoubtedly saved Karl's life, and placed his own in jeopardy in doing so. We rest at Camp 3 and continue the descent to Camp 2 by night where we both sleep soundly.

FRI 22 AUG: On arrival at Base Camp I'm busy treating frost-bitten extremities on Karl, Brian Agnew, Peter Lambert and attending to other minor medical matters. We attend to vasodilation and re-hydration with a home brew beer—ingredients courtesy of Fullers K2 expedition joined by Michel Dacher, who has climbed 9 x 8000 m peaks. Sigi Hupfauer and his wife and the Yugoslav have stayed with the Australian base camp whilst awaiting evacuation. Three Scots join us from the British Chogolisa Expedition, one of whom is later to fall to his death from the summit ridge of Broad Peak.

SUN 24 AUG: We commence the long trek back to Dasso. It is gratifying for James van Gelder and myself to have been stopped in the villages and shown healed wounds, or goitres that have shrunk with iodine administration. I act as seeing eye dog for James van Gelder (Retinal Haemorrhages).

THU 4 SEP: Embassy reception, meet press and Pakistani Ministry of Tourism Officials. Again, excellent treatment of team by Australian Ambassador and his staff.

FRI 5 SEP: Commence long flight home, board our Thai Airways Jet, and fly out 2 hours prior to the adjacent Pan Am 747, which is hit by terrorists, resulting in multiple deaths and woundings.

From *Report of the Army Alpine Association Broad Peak (8047 metres) expedition, Pakistan, 28 June to 7 September 1986*, Report no. R852-5-2, Army Alpine Association, Canberra, pp. H-3-7.

The Australian climbers should have been pleased with their performance on Broad Peak. Eight of the 14-man team reached the summit. It was only the second 8000 m mountain climbed by an Australian expedition and it brought to 10 the number of Australian climbers to have stood on an 8000 m summit. The other two were, of course, Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer on Everest in 1984.

Every much a breakthrough as the Nilgiri North expedition in 1983, the AAA Broad Peak success was a great psychological boost in their preparations for Everest. They proved that they could handle the organisation and logistics to mount a big, siege-style attack on Everest's West Ridge and they put six of their members on an 8000 m summit.

Jim van Gelder, however, sounded a cautionary note. He pointed out that although the trip seemed to be a very big success on the surface, it was very close to having been a failure, even a disaster:

We weren't properly acclimatised on Broad Peak. We didn't take enough time. There was a very short deadline on the trip; we climbed the mountain in the last week. A lot of people were very close to their limits. There were cases of frostbite and retinal haemorrhaging. We were very close to getting nobody up. Had bad weather come at the wrong time, we could have easily had a disaster.²⁰

Peter Lambert echoed van Gelder's concerns:

I was very close to my limit on Broad Peak. I became a bit hypothermic as a zip broke on my duvet and I had a cold wind on my neck all the way to the summit. It was quite an effort to get off. Coming back down into camp four, I was significantly exhausted. I had to sit down every couple of steps. I vowed I would never let myself get in that position again. It was a close call.²¹

Such thoughts were an antidote to any over-confidence as a result of the Broad Peak success. Everest, even by the traditional South Col route, would be higher and harder than Broad Peak—a point that Rheinberger often made to board members during the lead-up to the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE).

Several of the climbers appeared to be close to their limits on Broad Peak; Mike Rheinberger obviously was not. In addition to his very strong performance on the summit day, in which he climbed all the way from camp three at 7100 m to the top and then descended to camp four, Rheinberger was involved in several of the rescues. Immediately after that long summit day, Rheinberger was the first of the Australians back up from camp four to help Cullinan lower Fassnacht down the slopes below the col. Not only that, he accompanied Delaney over to the K2 base camp to assist in treating the survivors of that tragedy. Given his strong performance on Broad

²⁰ J. van Gelder, Interview.

²¹ P. Lambert, Interview.

Peak and his considerable experience, Rheinberger was truly ready for the ABEE in 1988. Still, he was not content to rest on his laurels for the intervening two years. In 1987, he was back among the Himalayan giants again—in fact, having another go at Everest itself.

For Rheinberger, this Everest expedition was quite a contrast with the large New Zealand trip in which he participated in 1985 on the north side of the mountain. The 1987 attempt was by a very small team by any measure; he joined only three other climbers: New Zealanders Peter Hillary and Kim Logan and Jon Muir, a young Australian from western Victoria. It was an exceptionally strong team. Hillary, son of Sir Edmund, was an experienced mountaineer in his own right, Logan was one of New Zealand's most accomplished ice climbers and Muir was a very skilled rock climber who, according to some observers, had become Australia's best alpinist. Rheinberger, of course, added a plentiful dose of experience, steadiness and all-round mountaineering skills and judgment to the team.

This time Rheinberger and his colleagues approached Everest from the south. Their route was a variant of the standard South Col route. They would follow the traditional line of ascent through the Khumbu Icefall and Western Cwm, but instead of climbing the Lhotse Face at the end of the cwm and then traversing across the top of a rock rib called the Geneva Spur onto the South Col, they would climb directly from the end of the cwm onto the South-East Ridge via a steep ice route between the Geneva Spur and a feature called the South Pillar. It was an ambitious project for such a small team, particularly in the colder, windier post-monsoon season.

If Rheinberger thought the mountain would be a little kinder to him than it was two years earlier, he was in for a big disappointment. It was to be another frustrating sojourn on Everest for him. In 1985, severe avalanche risk forced the New Zealand team down from all three routes they attempted; in 1987, it was the premature lowering of the jet stream and the accompanying fierce winds and raging storms that beat back the attempt. In fact, during the post-monsoon season of 1987, more than 150 climbers attempted Everest from all sides and none reached the top.

Of the New Zealand/Australian team, Logan and Rheinberger had the first crack at the top, in late September, when they climbed from the cwm (camp two) to 8100 m and then bivouacked in preparation for a summit bid the next day. The brief window of fine weather slammed shut quickly, however, and the pair was forced to fight for their lives in the heightening storm and then retreat via the South Col at the first opportunity in the morning. It was a harrowing night, as Rheinberger and Logan were forced to wedge their bodies across the tent to keep it from disintegrating. In the morning, they were repeatedly blown off their feet as they crossed the South Col. By the time they reached camp two in the Western Cwm, both were badly dehydrated and Logan was suffering second and third-degree frostbite to his fingers. That was punishment enough for the pair and they retired from the climbing.

Hillary and Muir, however, kept up the vigil at camp two throughout the rest of September and much of October in hopes that the incessant gales would abate long enough to make a dash for the top. Everest, however, had even worse in store.

On 19 October, with a steadily dropping barometer and high clouds blasting over the summit pyramid, Hillary and Muir descended to base camp, fearing the worst. Their judgment was faultless. More than 1 m of snow, whipped up by high winds, fell at base camp and forced the climbers to dismantle their mess tent to prevent its collapse under the load of snow. Higher on the mountain, two American climbers were in for one of the most frightening experiences of their lives, as Hillary recalled:

Peter Whittaker [one of the American climbers] later told me that he had lost his tent and all his equipment when he crawled from his tent briefly. A sudden gust had ripped the tent from its tie-downs, cartwheeling both the tent and Peter down the glacier. Peter relinquished his hold after the third rotation, the tent flew out of sight down the glacier, and Peter scrambled on all fours to the French box tent, which was still standing.

Elsewhere in the Mt Everest area nine people died in avalanches and from exposure.²²

The storm was so severe that it forced Hillary and Muir to retreat even further, as they were 'marooned by miles of snow drifts'.²³ They were forced several kilometres down the Khumbu Glacier below base camp. Not long afterwards, the pair turned their backs on Everest, still being lashed by unrelenting winds and shrouded in horrifyingly cold conditions. As Hillary and Muir descended through the Khumbu Icefall for the last time after having climbed back up to camp two to recover gear after the big storm, the mountain threw one last scare at them, as Hillary recalled:

Jon pulled on a [fixed] rope and, suddenly, all hell broke loose.

With a 'crack' an area 100 m deep and 200 m wide moved with a violence that gave neither of us time to do anything. Great crevasses opened around us, and snow tumbled into them. Other chasms dramatically snapped closed. The snow-covered surface of the ice buckled and corrugated like the rise and fall of surf upon a wild coastline. I unclipped from the fixed rope, as it had become taut, and began to run back up the slope. After five seconds all movement ceased, as quickly as it had started. We stood motionless looking at one another and after a minute we both shrugged and continued on into the chaos that had only then been rearranged.

Lugging our heavy packs of equipment, we negotiated the collapsed section of the ice fall, climbing vertical steps where there had been none before and ambling past horizontal ladders where they had previously been vertical. It was dark before we stumbled back into Base Camp, exhausted.²⁴

22 Hillary, P. 1988, 'Everest south pillar', *New Zealand Alpine Journal*, vol. 41, pp. 34–5.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

The narrow escape was yet another reminder of Everest's considerable defences. If the threat of massive avalanches, hurricane-force winds and life-threatening cold were not enough, the Russian roulette-like quality of journeys through the Khumbu Icefall would certainly send chills down the spines of the most experienced, competent mountaineers. If any of the ABEE climbers might have harboured thoughts that the South Col route—sometimes dubbed the 'Yak Route' by those unconvinced of Everest's potential for viciousness—would be a pushover, Rheinberger could put them straight.

Despite the failure to reach the summit, it was another consistently strong performance by Rheinberger. For the second time in two years, he climbed to more than 8000 m and on the Everest attempt he was forced to survive a dreadful night high on the mountain and then descend in the most appalling conditions. With his increasing depth and breadth of Himalayan experience and two recent attempts at Everest to his credit, Rheinberger was clearly ready for a third crack at the world's highest mountain with the ABEE in 1988. Where, however, were the rest of the civilians?

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.