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## Climbers wanted

By the mid to late 1980s, the nature of the Melbourne mountaineering community had changed quite considerably from that of 1980, when Tim Hughes had applied for the permit for Everest in 1988 on behalf of the southern Australian section of the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC). In 1980, the idea was simple: the small, closely knit core of Melbourne climbers would continue to build their base of Himalayan experience until they were ready to mount a lightweight attempt on the South Col route on Everest.

As described previously, those aspirations became inextricably bound up with the plans of the Army Alpine Association (AAA) for their attempt on Everest in 1988. Even had that not been the case, however, the original idea of the Melbourne-based Everest expedition would have had to change significantly simply because of attrition to the group through the 1980s.

The driving force for the early expeditions to Dharamsura, Changabang and Nanda Devi was undoubtedly the trio of Peter Allen, Mike Rheinberger and Andrew Rothfield. (Rothfield had left the climbing scene in 1981, before Nanda Devi.) Rheinberger, of course, was one of the most prolific of Australian Himalayan climbers throughout the decade. Allen, too, had considerable Himalayan experience, as he had taken part in the 1983 AAA Nilgiri North climb and the 1985 New Zealand Everest expedition in addition to the earlier Dharamsura and Changabang trips. He had also climbed Denali in 1981. Allen, however, although one of the strongest potential Everest participants on the civilian side, opted out of an active climbing role in the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) as he had just married, thereby acquiring a young family, and judged that the multiple trips through the Khumbu Icefall would be too risky. Rothfield was also out of contention as an ABEE climber. He gave up active climbing in 1981, just before he was set to go

to Denali (Mt McKinley) in Alaska with Rheinberger. So of the three civilians who were on the ABEE board of management—Rheinberger, Allen and Rothfield—only Rheinberger was in a position to set foot on the mountain itself.

The other Melbourne climbers who accompanied the trio on their early Himalayan trips had also dropped out of the mountaineering picture one by one. Of the other three members of the 1979 Dharamsura expedition, Max Berry and Gary Wills each made only one other trip to the Himalaya: Berry to Changabang in 1980 and Wills to Nanda Devi in 1982. Ed Neve returned twice: to Nanda Devi in 1982 and Shivering in 1985. Of the other Changabang climbers—Paul Anderson, John Dunlop, Pat Miller and Mal Noble—none returned to the Himalaya, nor did Hugh Foxcroft or Tom Millar of the Nanda Devi team. Apart from Rheinberger, only Keith Egerton of the 1982 Nanda Devi team climbed again in the Himalaya and he met a tragic end on Jannu two years before he had a chance to climb with the ABEE.

The changes that were occurring to the Melbourne mountaineering community during the 1980s were paralleled by changes to the southern Australian section of the NZAC. In fact, the section, as well as its northern counterpart in Sydney, was wound up and all Australian members of the NZAC were put on the ‘unattached’ list. About the same time, in late 1983, a new organisation was formed—the Australian Alpine Climbing Club (AACC)—to look after the interests of Australia’s alpine climbers, especially in their dealings with the mountaineering authorities in Nepal, India and Pakistan.

As an active climbing club, the AACC was short-lived. It enlisted 112 members, only half of whom were active climbers; published one newsletter; provided several endorsements for Australian expeditions going to India and Nepal; and, about a year after it was formed, lapsed into inactivity. During that year, however, the AACC had officially taken over from the southern Australian section of the NZAC as the permit holder for the South Col route on Everest in 1988. In theory, the AACC should therefore have been in an ideal position to supply civilian climbers for the ABEE, but its defunct state prevented it from playing that important role.

So by 1985 it had become clear to the civilian members of the ABEE board that they would have to actively recruit members for the civilian side of the expedition. ‘Climbers wanted’ advertisements, in the form of a small brochure on the ABEE, were sent to Australian members of the NZAC and posted in climbing shops around the country. The most effective method, however, was probably word of mouth within the Australian alpine climbing community.

The ABEE board received nearly 100 applications from Australian climbers. That large number reflected the state of Australian Himalayan climbing in the mid-1980s. What began with the Mulkila, Changabang, Dunagiri and Dharamsura trips in the 1970s as a trickle had become a decade later an increasingly heavy flow of Australian

mountaineers to take on the world's highest peaks. Many of these expeditions were related to Australian attempts on Everest, but many others were not. Australians were broadening their horizons and beginning to sample the tremendous variety of challenges the Himalaya have to offer: other 8000 m peaks besides Everest, rock climbing of the highest standard on great granite towers and mixed ice and rock climbing of considerable technical difficulty on beautiful and sometimes remote Himalayan mountains.

Although the entire ABEE board selected the climbing team, it was left to the civilian board members—Allen, Rheinberger and Rothfield—to select the civilian climbers, as it was left to the AAA to sort out its part of the team. The process of selection ‘worked itself out’, as Allen recalled. ‘People pretty much chose themselves by their own experience. Also, we tended to prefer people that we knew, people that we’d climbed with or that close friends of ours had climbed with.’<sup>1</sup> Firsthand knowledge is extremely important in Himalayan mountaineering, as climbers literally put each other’s lives in their hands when they climb together as a roped pair.

The number of civilian climbers chosen was not determined *a priori* but was finally determined late in the lead-up to the expedition. In the end, it represented a delicate compromise between conflicting pressures. As described later in Chapter 21, there was pressure from some quarters in the AAA to include as many of their representatives as possible, including some whose qualifications were questioned by the board. On the other hand, the civilian side had rather more well-experienced climbers to draw on. Parity had to be maintained, however, and the total team size had to be large enough to allow for an anticipated high attrition rate.

Several civilian climbers originally selected dropped out for various reasons. Ed Neve and Jonathan Chester withdrew, Geof Bartram dropped out when he thought the team had become too large, Michael Groom could not participate because of injuries suffered on Kangchenjunga (see Chapter 27) and Keith Egerton was killed on Jannu.

Despite these withdrawals, the civilian component of the team was very strong. It reflected the broad range of backgrounds and experiences of Australian Himalayan climbers in the mid-1980s. The ABEE climbers ranged from one who had never been to the Himalaya before, but had a very strong record of hard climbing in New Zealand, to one of Australia’s most experienced and active Himalayan climbers.

One of the earliest choices was Phil Pitham. Although closely associated with the AAA because of his participation in two of the early AAA expeditions and his stint in the army from 1979 to 1986, Pitham was in fact selected as one of the civilian members. He was a member of the 1981 Ganesh IV expedition, summited on Nilgiri North two years later and climbed in the Kulu region in 1984 and 1985.

1 P. Allen, Interview.

James Strohfeltd, one of four medical doctors on the ABEE team, was a climber who had built up his experience rapidly since 1985. In that year, he was invited on the AAA expedition that climbed Pisang and Chulu West, two trekking peaks in central Nepal, and in 1986 was a member of Mike Groom's trip to Kangchenjunga. In addition, Strohfeltd climbed Denali (Mt McKinley) in 1987 as a member of an AAA expedition.

One of the more interesting choices was Chris Curry, in that he was a 'second-generation' Australian Himalayan climber. His first introduction to mountains, like Tim Macartney-Snape's, came in East Africa. Born in Kenya, Curry grew up within sight of Mounts Kilimanjaro and Kenya, but he never had the chance to climb either before his family moved to Australia.

It was veteran Australian mountain guide Geof Bartram who later gave him his start in alpine climbing. In 1981, Curry joined a trek accompanying the Australian expedition to Anyemaqin in China, and during that trip he met Macartney-Snape, Bartram, Lincoln Hall and Andy Henderson. While trekking with Bartram later in Nepal, he was invited to join an expedition that Bartram was leading in 1984 to Pumori, a beautifully conical 7145 m peak just west of Everest. (The permit for this expedition was obtained from Rheinberger, who was forced to abandon his plans because of his broken ankle.) The keen Curry did not have to think twice before accepting, but admitted to Bartram, 'Hell! I don't know one end of a crampon from the other!'<sup>2</sup>

That was quickly remedied during the intervening two years. Curry climbed with Bartram for four months in South America and took mountaineering courses at Mount Blanc in France and in Switzerland. When 1984 rolled around, Curry was ready and joined Bartram and the other members of the seven-man team on the summit of Pumori after an ascent of the mountain by a new route on the South-East Face.

Curry, another of the medical doctors on the ABEE team, picked up more high-altitude experience after the Pumori expedition by climbing the highest peaks in North and South America: Denali and Aconcagua. The latter, at just less than 7000 m, is the highest mountain outside the great ranges of Asia. Curry's most impressive feat, on the other hand, was his ascent in 1985 of Pik Kommunizma, 7495 m, and Pik Korzhenevskaya, 7105 m, in the Soviet Union's Pamir Mountains, a range at the north-western end of the Greater Himalaya. It is rare for a climber to succeed on two 7000 m peaks during the same expedition.

One of the applications that stood out among those received by the ABEE board was that of Terry Tremble. After a start in rock climbing in 1982, Tremble soon gained a reputation as one of Australia's most skilled alpine climbers, one who was

2 Wilby, S. 1989, *Beyond the Icefall*, Childs & Associates, Sydney.

not averse to taking on big and dangerous mountains by difficult routes. His exploits in 1986 in the European Alps turned a few heads in Australian climbing circles. In addition to climbing Mt Blanc, the highest peak in the Alps, he polished off some of the range's most demanding routes: the Bonatti Pillar and the Dru Couloir, two classic routes on the Petit Dru; the Walker Spur of the Grandes Jorasses; and the North Face of the Droites. He topped off the spectacular season with an ascent of the infamous North Wall of the Eiger—the first time an Australian had succeeded on that alpine test piece.

Before his magnificent season in the Alps, Tremble had made a visit to the Himalaya, to a striking mountain called Shivling in the Gangotri region of India. He was joined by Ed Neve, a member of earlier expeditions to Dharamsura and Nanda Devi, and by Brigitte and Jon Muir, more of whom will be described later. Their attempts on two new routes did not meet with much success. During one attempt, Neve took a fall and decided thereafter to return to Australia; the Shivling trip was to be his last to the Himalaya. The other attempt was stopped by the arrival of the monsoonal snowstorms after a height of only 5900 m had been reached.

Later in the year of his alpine exploits, 1986, Tremble was in the Himalaya again—this time as a member of a three-man team to attempt Jannu, a 7710 m peak in the Kangchenjunga region of eastern Nepal. It was a most ambitious undertaking, but, given his impressive season in the Alps, one well within his capabilities. The other members of the Jannu team were New Zealander Don French and Victorian Keith Egerton, who was a member of the 1982 Australian expedition to Nanda Devi. Although small even by modern Himalayan standards, the team comprised very experienced mountaineers and thus had a good chance of success.

Tremble, French and Egerton attempted Jannu by the South-West Ridge, the route of the original French ascent but on the opposite side of the mountain from the route attempted by the New Zealand expedition in 1975. With only three climbers, there was little choice as to what style would be employed in the 1986 attempt; a siege-style ascent would have required at least three times that number.

In true alpine style, the trio was laden with heavy packs the first time they set foot on the mountain to climb as high as they could and, with a bit of luck, to the summit. After five days, they had climbed past three bivouac sites to about 6000 m, where they dumped much of their gear and headed back down to base camp to allow further acclimatisation. A second attempt was aborted at about the same point when a snowstorm struck. A third attempt, in mid-October, was thwarted by the loss of much gear and all of the team's high-altitude food rations when an avalanche obliterated a dump. The team overcame this serious situation by intercepting a French expedition retreating from a nearby mountain and appropriating the remains of their high-altitude rations.

Although the weather had finally cleared, luck was still not with the group. They climbed past their previous high point to a fourth bivvy site at 6700 m, in position for an attempt on the summit. After a windy night in the tent, they were ready for the final 1000 m of climbing when Egerton became ill. It soon became apparent that he was seriously ill, so Tremble and French shifted their focus from the summit to a rapid descent. It was to no avail. Egerton's condition deteriorated quickly and he died, probably of pulmonary oedema, just 200 m below the highest bivouac.

Egerton's death is a graphic reminder of just how suddenly oedema can strike and how vulnerable climbers are when high on a Himalayan mountain. The tragic demise of Egerton on Jannu was another blow to the Melbourne Himalayan climbing community, which had lost Tim Hughes in the accident in the Rishi Gorge in 1980 and, as noted later, suffered other tragic losses during the early 1980s.

The shock of the death of a friend on a first Himalayan expedition was a sobering experience for Tremble, but he was back in the Himalaya a year later for another go—in fact in very nearly the same place and again as a member of a three-person team. Their objective was Kangchenjunga itself, the world's third-highest mountain, and the team consisted of Tremble, Jim van Gelder and Carol Brand-Maher. In effect, it was a two-man climbing team as Brand-Maher had not done any climbing previously—in fact, she had never been on snow or camped in a tent! In the event, she climbed to 6000 m on Kangchenjunga's North Face and stood up well to the isolation of a very remote base camp.

Despite its enormous size, Kangchenjunga seems to attract many very small expeditions. The attempt by Tremble and van Gelder was only one of three two-person teams involving Australians to take on the mountain; of the other two teams, as described later, one pushed itself to the very limit of endurance and the other, tragically, beyond.

The van Gelder/Tremble attempt in 1987 did not quite reach those extremes. Nevertheless, it was a solid effort on the north side of the mountain, on a route steeper and more difficult than the one van Gelder and his colleagues tried the year before. Their attempt was done in a mixture of styles, with four camps established on the route and rope fixed to 7200 m. As it turned out, the fixed rope came in handy when a rapid descent was required.

In their first summit bid, Tremble and van Gelder moved quickly up through the camps, bivvied at the top of the fixed ropes and then climbed another 300 vertical metres when Tremble began to show symptoms of cerebral oedema. With the death of Egerton the previous year undoubtedly on his mind, Tremble immediately backed off and, with the aid of the fixed ropes, descended very quickly. The retreat turned out to be strategically timed as a massive snowstorm lashed the mountain soon after they arrived at base camp. When the storm cleared, the pair made a final attempt at the top but was beaten back by high winds and cold weather.

The expedition had its share of light moments; a Japanese team attempting the same route provided one of them. One of its members proudly announced to van Gelder and Tremble that they were adopting the modern approach and making a ‘really light-weight attempt’.<sup>3</sup> The Australians later learned that the Japanese team consisted of 16 climbers!

Brand-Maher had an even more bizarre encounter near base camp. One day she saw two figures approaching and, after having spent weeks on her own at a very lonely base camp, she raced up to greet them. She could not understand why they turned and ran when she shouted excitedly to them. Later she learned that they were two Australian trekkers searching for peace and solitude in the most remote corner of the Himalaya. They thought the north side of Kangchenjunga was it. Imagine their horror when they not only saw another human being, but were greeted by a cheery voice with an Australian accent!

Tremble had therefore served a busy apprenticeship to the ABEE with a lot of climbing packed into two years: the impressive season in the Alps followed by expeditions to Jannu and Kangchenjunga. In addition to Tremble, van Gelder was also an obvious choice for the ABEE team. He, like a couple of the other climbers, had a foot in both the civilian and the AAA groups; he had climbed on AAA expeditions and was an officer in the Army Reserve.

If Tremble and van Gelder were obvious choices for the ABEE, Paul Bayne certainly was not. One of the essential criteria for selection to the team was a certain minimum of Himalayan experience and preferably some experience above 7000 m. Not only had Bayne never been to the Himalaya, he had climbed nothing higher than New Zealand’s Mt Cook, a modest 3764 m and considerably lower than virtually any Himalayan base camp, let alone summit. ‘We took a bit of a punt on Paul,’ Peter Allen admitted.<sup>4</sup> If Allen gambled on the horses like he did on Bayne, he would be a millionaire many times over by now.

The one thing that did stand out in Bayne’s application was the sheer amount of mountaineering experience he had amassed. A Sydneysider, Bayne’s experience in the hills was centred primarily on bushwalking in the Blue Mountains until he joined an ‘end-of-school’ trip to New Zealand. There the students walked the Routeburn Track, one of New Zealand’s most well-known tramping routes, and then paid a visit to Mt Cook. One look at the high peaks of the Southern Alps and Bayne was hooked; he instantly fell in love with the area and decided to stay. It was early 1973 and Bayne was sixteen years old.

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<sup>3</sup> J. van Gelder, Interview.

<sup>4</sup> P. Allen, Interview.

For the next 10 or 12 years, Bayne, as he put it, ‘hung out’ in the Mt Cook area. He worked for two or three-month stints at The Hermitage, the tourist resort hotel below Mt Cook, and then climbed for two or three months. He took every Alpine Guides course he could, from basic mountaineering to ski-mountaineering in the winter season, and by 1976 began to guide himself. Five years later, he had finished the guiding courses and became a fully certified guide—in fact, the first Australian to become a Union Internationale des Associations d’Alpinisme (UIAA) certified guide.

Although from then on Bayne spent nearly every fine day guiding other people up climbs they wanted to do, in 1985, he did manage to sneak in a climb of his own—one that stood out even among the extreme ascents being made by the hard men of the New Zealand ice-climbing scene.

The setting was Mt Tasman, New Zealand’s second-highest peak, and the climb Bayne had in mind was the Balfour Face, a very steep, very committing, technically demanding ice climb. It was a route that was often talked about with considerable awe by other climbers during conversations in the huts. Bayne had his first view of the Balfour Face when he was caught in a storm on Mt Silberhorn, a nearby mountain, and peered through a momentary break in the clouds. What he saw confirmed what he had heard in hut conversations. When he found the opportunity to attempt it, he polished off the route in remarkable fashion: in record time and solo—the first time the Balfour Face had been climbed by a single person not roped to a partner. It was a triumph of technical skill, confidence and daring.

The solo ascent of the Balfour Face could easily have made the difference for the success of Bayne’s application for the ABEE team. Even with that achievement to his credit, he was, however, originally accepted only as a ‘reserve’ because of his lack of high-altitude experience. After all, he was not only going to the Himalaya for the first time, he was going to attempt Everest, the highest of them all.

Did that lack of high-altitude experience worry Bayne? ‘No, not really. I had a lot of mileage in the mountains—a lot of experience in alpine climbing over 10 or 12 years. Altitude isn’t that big a thing, just an exaggeration of the pain and suffering scale that you experience on any big climb.’<sup>5</sup> What Bayne did not realise at the time was that on Everest he was going to go further along the pain and suffering scale than he ever dreamt was possible.

There were two late inclusions to the team. One was Bruce Farmer, a climber with considerable alpine climbing experience and with two Himalayan expeditions under his belt. He was a New Zealander, previously a president of the NZAC, but on moving to Tasmania, he became an Australian citizen. Until the ABEE, all of his

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5 P. Bayne, Interview.

expedition climbing had been done with New Zealand teams. He was deputy leader of the Southland Patagonian expedition to South America in 1977, a position he also held in both of his Himalayan expeditions—to Molamenqing in 1981 and Everest in 1985. On the latter, of course, he climbed with Rheinberger and Allen.

The last climber to join the team, in December 1987, was Jon Muir. Muir's late inclusion had nothing to do with his experience or climbing ability; apart from Mike Rheinberger, he was easily the most experienced Himalayan climber of the ABEE team, having made two previous attempts on Everest and several other trips to mountains in the Indian Himalaya. The problem was that Muir simply could not afford the contribution that each ABEE climber had to make. The situation was resolved when it was eventually arranged that he should be invited to join the expedition as a cameraman for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), which was to film the climb. Muir's late addition to the team did more than just add a very strong mountaineer; it gave the ABEE one of the liveliest characters ever to appear

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