

# 19

## Turkeys on ice

Jon Muir is one of those people who can truly be described as unforgettable. Red-haired and freckle-faced, he possesses a zany sense of humour, an inexhaustible amount of energy and an unbounded zest for life that never fail to impress people on meeting him.

Sorrel Wilby, in her book *Beyond the Icefall*, described Muir as ‘by far the most interesting guy on the [Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition] team; irreverent, crazy, uninhibited, good humoured and so intense his eyes were permanently popping out of their freckled sockets’.<sup>1</sup> Muir’s Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) colleague Jim Truscott, in recounting a satirical book review of a mythical volume on the expedition, included a chapter entitled ‘Am I normal—the Ozymandias story (Readers—judge this catalogue of Jon Muir’s weirdness for yourselves)’.<sup>2</sup>

It is his wild sense of humour, however, that is probably the most prominent trait in Muir’s character. Wilby recalls being kept awake one night during the walk in to the ABEE base camp by ‘Jon’s manic laughter, ringing out from the adjoining room’,<sup>3</sup> and, at another point when he led the response to his own joke, ‘even his freckles started shaking with laughter’.<sup>4</sup> She concluded, even before the ABEE team had arrived in Kathmandu, that Muir was ‘ready for a strait-jacket—not a climbing harness’.<sup>5</sup>

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

2 Truscott, J. 1989, ‘Satirical book review’, *AAA Newsletter*, no. 3/89, p. 9.

3 Wilby, *Beyond the Icefall*, ch. 3.

4 *Ibid.*

5 *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

His climbing exploits kept up with his sense of humour. He seemed equally at home on Australian rock, in the alpine environments of Europe and New Zealand and in the rarefied atmosphere of the Himalaya; and he climbed at the very highest of standards regardless of medium or location. By 1987, his record of achievements was so impressive that the *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin* followed its account of his latest Himalayan trip with a profile entitled ‘Who is Jon Muir?’.<sup>6</sup>

Who is Jon Muir indeed?

Born in the NSW coastal city of Wollongong, Muir was a rather typical young lad by the time he was fifteen years old. He was starting to wonder what to do with his life. He had read all of the career books at school but nothing appealed to him. Then, as he recalled with considerable enthusiasm, a single event occurred that was to irrevocably change his life.

One evening I was watching the BBC TV documentary *Everest the Hard Way*, the account of Chris Bonington’s 1975 British expedition to the South-West Face of Everest. Then, during the program, it was like this hand leapt out of the screen and grabbed me by the heart. I jumped up and yelled, ‘That’s what I want to do! I want to climb Mt Everest!’

So after that I went down to the Wollongong library and read every book on climbing that I could find. Then I went out and started doing some rock climbing myself on the cliffs behind Wollongong. I started off soloing. Eventually I convinced a few of my friends to climb with me. I borrowed my sister’s horse rope. We’d wrap it around a tree at the top of the cliff and then belay around another tree at the bottom; there was enough friction for it to work. Even at that time, though, I still really wanted to climb mountains, not just rock faces.<sup>7</sup>

Before long, the young Jon Muir had his chance to climb mountains. He met what he described as ‘real climbers, with clanking gear and things like that’.<sup>8</sup> Two of those climbers were Graeme Hill and Russell Chudleigh and Hill soon became Muir’s teacher—for rock climbing and mountaineering. In early 1978, Hill took Muir to New Zealand for his first taste of alpine climbing and the pair returned the next two seasons to climb together in the Southern Alps.

The first year was devoted to ascents of easy and medium-grade climbs, but Muir rapidly graduated from those and by 1980 was climbing some of the hardest routes in the Mt Cook region. Hill, recalling some of their early epics such as getting lost on a descent from the Footstool and battling rockfalls and green ice to the top of Malte Brun, described Muir as ‘strong but senseless’ with ‘far too much push for

6 *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, September 1987, p. 24.

7 J. Muir, Interview.

8 *Ibid.*

the first season.’<sup>9</sup> He also, however, quickly discerned a trait that would later be responsible for keeping Muir alive through some harrowing experiences: ‘When we got into tight situations, he always made good decisions.’<sup>10</sup>

The other quality that got Muir out of difficult situations was his climbing prowess; often he could simply climb his way out of a tight spot. Hill remembered their night-time ascent of the Syme Ridge of Mt Tasman:

We had only one torch, and Jon led the difficult mixed rock and ice route up the ridge. It was a tricky route, even in daylight. Jon would lead up and then yell down, ‘You head for the torch. I’ll keep you on a tight rope.’ It was hard climbing on horrendously loose rock. I just scabbled around in the darkness and Jon pulled me up.<sup>11</sup>

Muir’s exuberant personality was also apparent in his early trips to New Zealand, as Jim Truscott recalled: ‘Rick Moor and I were at Pudding Rock and watched Muir and another climber heading up to Empress with a full stereo system (large!) on top of their packs, booming across the glacier!’<sup>12</sup>

During his 1980 New Zealand trip, Muir, and his irrepressible sense of humour, launched a group of young Australian climbers he dubbed the ‘International Turkey Patrol’. The ITP held great promise to become a leading Australian force in Himalayan climbing, indeed to push the standard of Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia to even higher standards. Before that potential could be fully realised, however, tragic accidents would decimate the ranks of the ITP and leave the survivors under no illusions about the sober reality of the dangers of climbing in the Himalaya.

The ITP was born one typical New Zealand day in 1980 with the weather too foul for climbing, so a group of mountaineers was holed up in Plateau Hut near the base of Mt Cook—as was usual for periods of bad weather. Two of the inhabitants of Plateau Hut were Muir and a young Victorian climber, Roddy Mackenzie, who had been identifying themselves around the Southern Alps as the ‘Turkey Patrol’. They appropriated that tag from a rock route of the same name first climbed by John Smoothie, a Blue Mountains rock climber, at Mt Piddington. A Canadian mountaineer also ensconced at Plateau Hut was taken by the name ‘Turkey Patrol’, so was appointed to the group. The Turkey Patrol had gone international.

The ITP, however, eventually came to be associated with a group of four young Australian climbers. Muir and Mackenzie were founding members and two young Victorian climbers, Mark Moorhead and Craig Nottle, joined them in their most

9 G. Hill, Interview.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 J. Truscott, Personal communication.

memorable exploits. The four climbers shared several traits: they all became very skilled rock climbers, with Mt Arapiles in western Victoria the focus of their climbing; they all sought out challenging climbs, on rock and ice, and pushed their abilities to ever higher standards; and they all possessed a robust sense of humour and an enthusiasm for life that gained them just as much notoriety as did their hard climbing.

Mackenzie's start in climbing had much in common with that of several other Australian Himalayan mountaineers. Like Tim Macartney-Snape, Mackenzie attended Timbertop, the outdoor activities centre for Geelong Grammar School, and went bushwalking and kayaking, mostly in the Victorian Alps and Snowy Mountains. At the age of fifteen, he climbed Tasmania's Federation Peak—a serious undertaking for a young bushwalker—with Tim van Gelder, Jim's brother.

Like Jon Muir, Mackenzie was captivated by the television documentary *Everest the Hard Way* and decided that climbing mountains was something he would like to do. Furthermore, as had many other Australians before him, he initially took a Mountain Recreation course from Geoff Wayatt in New Zealand before going on to harder alpine climbing in the Southern Alps. The turning point of his career came in 1980, when Mackenzie spent six months climbing in New Zealand, much of it with Russell Braddock, a very skilled Kiwi ice climber. It was during that period also that Mackenzie teamed up with Muir for the first time, although it was the next season that the pair combined again to climb many of the classic routes in the Southern Alps.

If there was anything as notable as Mackenzie's climbing skill, it was his rather casual appearance. Peter Hillary was suitably impressed on visiting Mackenzie at the family property in western Victoria before a later Himalayan expedition:

I arrived in mid-afternoon. It was very hot and the only thing that moved were great squadrons of lazy flies that homed in to form a halo round me and the dust-covered four-wheel drive inside which I sat wiping sweat from my brow.

A shot rang out and then another. I looked out in the direction of the shots. Roddy came swaggering round the corner of the old white weatherboard homestead. Consistent with his philosophy that farm apparel should be rugged, dispensable and, principally, old, his shoes, a pair of expedition issue from a previous mountaineering adventure, had self destructed to the point where he was having difficulty containing his toes. The green cotton trousers were now little more than shredded canvas with a facility for stuffing hands into pockets. Indeed, the uniformed observer would have assumed they were a form of grass skirt, a touching memento from one of Roddy Mackenzie's many exploits. But it was his shirt that had delivered the most outstanding value, as he had worn it since the third form at school. Roddy is a big man. Only two buttons were capable of sustaining the pressure put upon them, with

the result that the garment was also well-ventilated. Six feet above this splendidly personalised outfit was the affable Mackenzie smile, alert eyes, and an extraordinary mop of tightly curled golden fleece.<sup>13</sup>

Mackenzie had come to know the other two members of the ITP, Mark Moorhead and Craig Nottle, in the late 1970s at Mt Arapiles in western Victoria. Both had quickly established reputations by then and had done some of the hardest climbs at Australia's most popular crag. Like Muir and Mackenzie, Moorhead possessed a lively sense of humour, being described by Nottle as 'a campfire comedian' and as having 'a ridiculing Pythonesque humour [that] kept everything well within perspective'.<sup>14</sup> As for his climbing, Moorhead was smaller and not as strong as Muir or Mackenzie, but was just as skilled, being able to climb the hardest routes at Arapiles and take part in the development of many new climbs in the area.

Nottle was rather different from the other three members of the ITP. Although he too possessed a keen wit (it would have been impossible to be a member of the ITP without one), he also had a serious side. He had his start in climbing with the Melbourne University Mountaineering Club (MUMC); he was a medical student at Melbourne University at the time. His sharp analytical mind was applied to climbing as well as to his academic work. He was always careful to ensure that every bit of his equipment was precisely matched to the task and that he took nothing extraneous up the mountain. Always present, however, as a counterpoint to the serious side, was the humour that was such an important part of ITP adventures.

Although the members of the ITP climbed at Mt Arapiles and in the Southern Alps in the late 1970s and early 1980s, it was in 1982 that they put it all together for a two-pronged assault on the mountains—first the European Alps and then the Himalaya.

Their tour de force in the Alps in 1982 was just as impressive as the season Terry Tremble would notch up in the Alps four years later. Only three of the ITP—Muir, Moorhead and Nottle—participated in the 1982 alpine adventures; Mackenzie thought the Alps too crowded and competitive for his tastes, so he headed for the mecca of big-wall climbing: California's Yosemite Valley. There he put in a solid six weeks of hard climbing, which included an ascent in only two days of a famous route called the 'Nose'.

Meanwhile back in the Alps, the other three ITP members were doing some very hard climbing themselves. In just a few weeks based at Chamonix, they knocked off some of the most well-known and difficult routes in the Mt Blanc area: the North Faces of Les Droites and the Charmoz, the Central Pillar of Freney on Mt Blanc, the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses and the Dru Couloir, among

13 Hillary, P. 1988, *Rimo. Mountain on the Silk Road*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, ch. 1.

14 Nottle, C. 1984, 'Obituary. Mark Moorhead', *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, vol. 37, p. 132.

others. Ticking off their list of successes, however, gave little hint of the desperate climbing, uncomfortable bivouacs and terrifying storms they had to endure on these test pieces of alpine climbing. Muir's account of their epic on the Walker Spur is typical of their wild adventures:

We had no knowledge of the descent route and the storm had obliterated any tracks that may have shown the way. It was time to bivouac. As usual, we had no spare clothes, no sleeping bags or mats, no stove or food, so it didn't take long to prepare for the night. We just squeezed into the one-person bivvy sack and started to shiver. It was the longest and coldest night of our lives.

Some time in the middle of it the lightning began. The flashes, crashes and booms were blinding and deafening; inside the sack it was brighter than day. The storm was right over our heads; our fingers and toes tingled and buzzed. We were wet, freezing, starving, thirsty and exhausted and at any moment might have been fried to a crisp, but we were happy.

It wasn't for sunny days in friction boots on warm granite that we had travelled half the world. We had come for the excitement and adventure of a desperate struggle. We sang *Always Look on the Bright Side of Life* from *The Life of Brian* and laughed till we cried. Though I wasn't sorry to see it end, it had been a great night.

A fine morning greeting us and we were up and away in no time. We found Craig and his partner camped in a nearby crevasse. They had been severely jolted by lightning three times. Their confused talk and the wild look in their eyes said it all; they were more spaced out than anyone I had ever seen.<sup>15</sup>

One would have thought that after weeks of adventures like that, they might have been ready for a few quiet days in the sun on the beach. The ITP, however, was not finished for 1982. Muir, Moorhead and Nottle called in, on their way back from Europe, on the Indian Himalaya, where they were joined by Mackenzie (see image 19.1). The mountain they had in their sights was Changabang (6864 m) and they were going to climb it by a technically very difficult route.

The suggestion to attempt Changabang came from Jim Duff, another inhabitant of Plateau Hut at the time the ITP was being formed. Duff, as noted earlier, was the doctor on the 1984 Australian Everest expedition. He had also been a member of several British expeditions to the Himalaya and thus knew the region quite well.

The four young Australians, even though they had just come from two of the most beautiful mountain settings in the world, could not have been anything but amazed by their first sight of Changabang.

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15 Muir, J. 1990, 'At the edge', *Rock*, no. 12 (January–June), pp. 26–9.

English climber Peter Boardman said:

Changabang is a miraculous peak in that it is quite unlike any of those surrounding it. Longstaff [Tom Longstaff, an English climber of the early 1900s] described it as the most superbly beautiful mountain he had ever seen. Perhaps it would melt away if set amongst the towers of the Karakoram, but in the Garhwal its suspended stone stands alone and distinct—a fascinating challenge.<sup>16</sup>

Another early English climber, Frank Smythe, was also taken by ‘the terrible precipices of Changabang, a peak that falls from crest to glacier in a wall that might have been sliced in a single cut of a knife’.<sup>17</sup>

By 1982, Changabang had been climbed a few times and, indeed, Australians had been to the summit on the successful 1980 trip led by Mike Rheinberger. That climb—as had the first ascent by a British team in 1974—followed the line of least resistance: a snow climb up the face of neighbouring Kalanka and then a traverse of Changabang’s icy South-East Ridge to the top. Even bigger climbing challenges, however, lay on the other side of Changabang, on the sheer rock faces and ridges of its southern and western aspects. It was to a prominent feature on this side of the mountain, the South-West Ridge, that the ITP turned their attention.

Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya was still in its rather early stages at the time of the ITP attempt on Changabang in 1982. At that time, Australians had climbed only one 7000 m peak—nearby Dunagiri in 1978—and nearly all Australian climbs in the Himalaya had been attempted on the easiest route on the mountain. Although some of these, such as Dunagiri, were quite difficult in their own right, only one (Greg Child and Rick White’s ascent of Shivling in 1981; see Chapter 24) was as technically difficult as the routes on Changabang’s precipitous rock walls. Muir, Moorhead, Mackenzie and Nottle would face climbing just as difficult technically as many of their routes on the sun-drenched rock of Mt Arapiles, but on Changabang they would have to contend with the awkwardness of climbing with heavy packs, the treachery of rock coated with snow or ice, the danger of sudden changes in weather and the debilitating effects of high altitude. It was a formidable challenge for first-timers to the Himalaya.

Before they could come to grips with the challenge of Changabang, however, they had to get to the base of the mountain. Even hardened adventurers such as the ITP could not help but be amazed by the bus ride to Lata. Mackenzie recalled:

The word ‘road’ scarcely conveys the horror of it, a truly fantastic piece of engineering. In several places you could step off the road and not touch anything till you met the Ganges 600 metres below. Encouraging little signs like ‘Your family is awaiting your return, drive safely’ and ‘Life is short, don’t make it shorter’ adorned the sharp corners.<sup>18</sup>

16 Boardman, P. 1977, ‘Changabang commentary’, *Mountain*, no. 55 (May–June), pp. 18–27.

17 Mackenzie, R. 1983, ‘Frozen turkey’, *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, vol. 36, pp. 93–6.

18 *Ibid.*

Just as impressive were their first views of Changabang itself. ‘Quite a sight,’ Mackenzie said, ‘the sort of thing you can sit and look at for a long time and then decide that (a) the angle you are looking from is deceptive and it can’t really be like that or (b) you have had too much to drink, smoke or the altitude has done something funny.’<sup>19</sup> Muir also found the mountain almost surreal: ‘It’s incredible. I can’t believe it’s real.’<sup>20</sup>

Changabang was indeed real and the foursome soon faced the task of trying to scale the South-West Ridge. Interestingly, that difficult route had previously been climbed, not once but twice, by Japanese and Italian teams that used different starting points to join the main ridge higher on the mountain. Both ascents employed siege tactics. In fact, the Japanese fixed nearly 2500 m of rope, used 300 pitons and took 33 days of climbing to gain the summit! The ITP would have none of the siege tactics; even had they been able to afford the thousands of metres of fixed rope, it simply was not their style. They would employ alpine-style tactics, much in the way that Peter Boardman and Joe Tasker climbed the West Face in 1976.

Their first attempt ended in typically swashbuckling ITP style. After five days of climbing on the Japanese route, a storm forced them off the ridge at about 6500 m and down to the Italian Col, below the point where the ridge bifurcated. They abseiled down the steep rock wall below the col, leaving their four 50 m climbing ropes in place to use when they would climb back to the col. They did not, however, reckon on a continuous rock band that interrupted the slabs that led down from the wall. With no ropes left, they were forced to tie all of their slings, etriers and hardware together, and even that makeshift chain left them 10 m short. They had no choice but to descend hand over hand down the chain and then drop off the end and hope for the best. Luckily, they landed in a powder snowdrift and slid harmlessly down a snow slope.

After a five-day rest, they were back on the attack, the attempt now following the Italian route. This time the weather held and with the team at the peak of acclimatisation, they made rapid progress. It was absorbing climbing. Nearly every pitch, according to Muir, was truly mixed climbing, with crampons on and then off to handle the variation in medium from snow to rock. The route was liberally sprinkled with difficult rock pitches that required the full bag of rock climber’s tools: laybacks, finger and hand jams, bridging across corners on small holds and a reasonable dose of aid climbing as well.

After nearly 2000 m of such climbing, the four Australians were on the summit of Changabang. It was only four days after they had left advanced base camp—a remarkable contrast with the 33 days it had taken the Japanese team. After a bivouac just beneath the summit, they descended the original route of ascent to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> J. Muir in *ibid.*

the Changabang Glacier. They had planned to cross the Italian Col back over to the basin of the Rhamani Glacier and to their base camp, but the col was out of condition and they were forced to descend the Changabang Glacier all the way to the Rishi Gorge.

The elation of their tremendous performance on the mountain turned into the dread of a desperate trudge, as they were very short on food. ‘We soon found ourselves at the bottom of the Changabang Glacier at an old derelict expedition hut shell,’ Mackenzie remembered:

The scene was bizarre, as if we had been transported into Polanski’s *Macbeth*. Scores of ravens wheeled and cawed while lammergeyers and vultures soared above us in spiralling circles as we rummaged through the debris left by the previous expedition looking for food. All the while an old horned animal skull peered down on us from the stone wall.<sup>21</sup>

Fortunately for the wasting ITP members, the Melbourne-based expedition from Nanda Devi was returning down the Rishi Gorge at the same time and they were still reasonably laden with food. The spectacle of Muir, Moorhead, Mackenzie and Nottle ravenously downing mountains of chappattis and jam was one that greatly amused the local staff and porters.

The Changabang success presaged great things for the self-styled ITP. In their first trip to the Himalaya, they had taken on a difficult mountain by a difficult route and blazed up it in only four days. It was a bold undertaking for such a young group and it marked the entry of Australian expeditions into the recent trend of small teams tackling very severe mixed ice and rock routes in the rarefied atmosphere of the high Himalaya. There seemed to be no limit to what the boisterous ITP members could achieve in the next decade, either individually or as a group.

Mark Moorhead was the first of the ITP to return to the Himalaya, joining a small team to attempt Makalu, the world’s fifth-highest mountain, in the post-monsoon season of 1983. The four-man team was led by New Zealander Peter Hillary and included another New Zealander, Bill Denz. Another of the hard young Kiwi ice climbers, Denz had made a name for himself by soloing several difficult routes in the Southern Alps and by a number of very difficult climbs in the Darran Mountains of Fiordland and in Patagonia. The fourth member of the team was an Australian, Fred From.

If Australians in general are unlikely Himalayan mountaineers, then Queenslanders, such as Fred From, are even more so. From’s start in climbing went back to the early 1970s and was firmly rooted in the rock-climbing scene of south-eastern Queensland. Throughout the 1970s, he was in the forefront, doing new routes and

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<sup>21</sup> Mackenzie, ‘Frozen turkey’.

repeating others at the very highest standards. He was also generous to beginners and gave his time often as an instructor for the University of Queensland Climbing Club. His connection with the university went beyond climbing. He first gained a Bachelor of Applied Science degree and then in 1984 received a Doctorate in ionospheric physics.

From, however, was most notable for his penchant for climbing barefooted, no matter how rough the rock was. Even in New Zealand, he shunned shoes as much as he could. Geoff Wyatt recalled:

Fred From spending a week in the Matukituki Valley barefoot the whole time below the snowline—a fit climber with tough feet! But then I had to laugh when I saw him later in Wanaka walking the streets in a new pair of cheap white running shoes. The Matuki is a tough valley.<sup>22</sup>

From's trip to Makalu in 1983 was not his first encounter with a Himalayan giant. A year earlier he had been a member of another four-man team—again led by Peter Hillary—to Lhotse, Everest's neighbour and, at 8501 m, the fourth-highest mountain in the world. The Lhotse team was notable on two accounts. The first was its multinational character; in addition to Australian From and New Zealander Hillary, it consisted of Englishman Adrian Burgess and Scot Paul Moores. Hillary added that the members 'were not entirely united by the English language—a spectral assortment of dialects existed'.<sup>23</sup> The team's other notable characteristic was its bulk; the climbers weighed 93 kg, 92 kg, 76 kg and 75 kg. A French mountaineer in Kathmandu labelled them 'the heaviest expedition he had ever seen'.<sup>24</sup>

Their bulk was matched by strength and determination. After negotiating the dangerous Khumbu Icefall (in which a Canadian climber was killed during a simultaneous expedition to Mt Everest), they spent three weeks in the Western Cwm primarily fixing ropes up the West Face of Lhotse. Their route followed the classic South Col route on Everest as far as the Geneva Spur at 7800 m. There the route on Lhotse continued up the face while Everest climbers would begin the traverse across to the South Col.

Hillary's team had put itself in good position for the summit with the establishment of a high camp at 7800 m on the flanks of the Geneva Spur. Their bid for the top was, unfortunately, thwarted by the weather. Despite an ominous plume of windblown snow trailing off the top of adjacent Everest, the four climbers pushed on towards Lhotse's summit pyramid and began to pick their way through the rock towers via a system of gullies. With the wind howling and snow beginning to fall, however, the wise choice was to retreat.

<sup>22</sup> G. Wyatt, Personal communication.

<sup>23</sup> Hillary, P. 1983, 'Lhotse '82', *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, vol. 38, pp. 71–6.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

It was a particularly rough decision for From, who wanted to continue. He was out in front, going strongly and only 250 vertical metres below the summit. In climbing to 8250 m on Lhotse, From became only the second Australian at that time to have climbed above the magic 8000 m level. The first, of course, was George Ingle Finch on the 1922 British Everest expedition. From, therefore, was the first Australian to climb past 8000 m without the aid of artificial oxygen.

The next year, From and Hillary, this time joined by Denz and Moorhead, were back for another attempt on a massive Himalayan peak. Makalu, 8481 m high, is only marginally lower than Lhotse and their route, the West Ridge, is a much more aesthetic line of ascent than their route on Lhotse. Viewed from the upper Barun Plateau, the West Ridge of Makalu rises in a single graceful arc towards the summit. It is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful lines in the Himalaya and what makes it doubly attractive is that it leads to the top of one of the world's most massive peaks.

The alluring route had been climbed twice before—by the French in 1971 and the Americans in 1980—but both were large teams that essentially sieged the mountain. Like the ITP had done on Changabang, the small Australian–New Zealand team on Makalu would attempt the route in alpine style—in essence, a first ascent of a classic route in the new, lightweight style.

Despite the persistence of monsoonal cloud in early September, the quartet pushed the route out from camp one at the edge of permanent snow along a scary, knife-edged ridge to camp two, a roomy crevasse that provided almost palatial trappings at 6800 m. Above that point, the climbing became even more difficult, with sections named the 'Terrible Traverse' and 'Little Eiger face'.<sup>25</sup>

Progress was slowed but remained steady. Camp three was an ice cave, beyond which the ridge steepened even further and ice and snow-covered rock made the climbing even more difficult. After a day of hard work above camp three, in which the route was established to 7300 m, a powder-snow avalanche swept across the descending climbers' path. From was lucky to escape, but Denz was caught in the slide and carried to his death.

It was a terrible blow to the small, closely knit team. The scheduled rest at base camp before pushing higher turned into a sad period of mourning and reflection. The remaining three decided to continue with the expedition and put all their effort into getting to the top of Makalu.

It seemed at first as though their determination would pay off. They moved back up the ridge and climbed past their previous high point and up to more than 7600 m. They had surpassed most of the technical difficulties and had a good run from there

25 Hillary, P. 1984, 'Makalu West Pillar', *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, vol. 37, p. 51.

to the summit. 'It had seemed to us more a question of how many would reach the top,' Hillary said, 'success was almost taken for granted.'<sup>26</sup> Virtually nothing, however, can be taken for granted in the Himalaya.

They decided to descend once more to base camp for another rest before finally going for the summit. On the way back down the ridge, Moorhead fell and was killed. Two tragedies in just a fortnight were too much for the stunned From and Hillary to overcome. Not only had the small team been cut in half, the surviving pair had lost two companions. They had little choice but to abandon the climb, even though success seemed imminent, and return to Australia.

The double tragedy on Makalu was another reminder to the Australian climbing community of the dangerous reality of climbing in the Himalaya. Australians had just begun to forget the horrible tragedy three years earlier on Annapurna III, when three Australian mountaineers were killed in a freak avalanche.

For the ITP, the death of Moorhead was a cruel blow to such a young group with so much potential. They had already shown what they were capable of with the tremendous success on Changabang in their first Himalayan trip. They had many more ideas and plans for daring ascents in the Himalaya. Even before they could recover from the loss of Moorhead, however, and begin to fulfil some of their hopes and dreams, the ITP would be dealt another savage blow.

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26 Ibid.

This text is taken from *Himalayan Dreaming: Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia, 1922–1990*, by Will Steffen, published 2017 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.