

# 20

## Innocence lost

‘TUR...KEY...PA...TROL!!!’ The call echoed across the Western Cwm, the floor of the great horseshoe formed by Nuptse, Lhotse and Mt Everest. It must have seemed impossible to the callers—a group of skiers perched on the Lho La—that their cry could have been heard by the inhabitants of the tiny tents pitched at the side of an enormous crevasse under the huge north wall of Nuptse. Yet, a short while later, the return call of ‘A...TEAM!!!’ wafted back up across the Lho La.<sup>1</sup>

The year was 1984 and the skiers atop the Lho La, a pass at the base of Everest’s West Ridge, were members of the first Australian expedition to the world’s highest peak. As described in Chapter 12, two of that team’s climbers, Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer, became the first Australians to reach the summit of Mt Everest with their impressive ascent of the Great Couloir.

Macartney-Snape, Mortimer, Lincoln Hall, Andy Henderson and Geof Bartram—sometimes dubbed the A-team—were not the only Australian mountaineers attempting Everest in the post-monsoon season of 1984. Based in the Western Cwm on the other side of the mountain were four Australians and two New Zealanders, ready to tackle the formidable West Ridge in an alpine-style push. At the time, it would have been very difficult to predict which team had the better chance of success. In fact, a betting man would probably have put money on the six Antipodeans preparing to do battle with the West Ridge.

Recall the situation in September 1984. The North Face team led by Macartney-Snape and Hall certainly had the most experienced Australian climbers in the Himalaya but none of them had previously climbed to 8000 m (although all but

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1 Hall, L. 1985, *White Limbo*, Weldons, Sydney, ch. 9.

Bartram nearly did so in their ascent of Annapurna II). Furthermore, they were to attempt a new route on Everest and no-one had ever made a first ascent of a route on Everest without using artificial oxygen or with such a small party.

At least the other group knew that their route, the West Ridge, was climbable. An American team had scaled it in 1963. And the Australian/New Zealand 1984 team was not exactly lacking in talent or experience either. One of the Kiwis was Peter Hillary, who had been high on both Makalu and Lhotse in the previous two years. The other was Kim Logan, the strong ice climber who would join Hillary, Mike Rheinberger and Jon Muir on the Everest South Pillar expedition in 1987.

After Moorhead's death on Makalu the previous year, the remaining three ITP members—Muir, Roddy Mackenzie and Craig Nottle—had regrouped to form the core of the Australian contingent. The fourth member was Fred From, who had put in two very strong performances on Himalayan giants, first climbing to well above 8000 m on Lhotse and then reaching the high point on Makalu. With the ITP's remarkable ascent of Changabang still fresh in the minds of most Australasian mountaineers, the six-man West Ridge group seemed odds-on favourites to send the first Australian(s) to the top of the world.

Muir, in particular, was a good bet to get to the top. He followed his 1982 grand tour of the Alps and then Changabang with another trip to Europe in 1983. During this trip, he attempted an even more severe route: 'Rolling Stone', on the North Face of the Grandes Jorasses. His experience was remarkable, not for his success but for his sixth sense in snuffing out dangers when none seemed apparent and convincing the four British climbers who made up the rest of the team to turn back in the face of perfect conditions. That intuitive decision resulted in a narrow escape from an enormous rock fall.

## Rolling Stone

Jon Muir

As a 15-year-old, I read the book *North Face—The Second Conquest of the Alps*. The North Face of the Grandes Jorasses has fascinated me ever since. Although I'd climbed it by the classic Walker Spur in 1982, I was still obsessed, and keen to attempt one of the more 'modern' routes.

A year later, this time with four powerful British climbers, I headed up the Leschaux Glacier once more. We planned to make the second ascent of the 1979 route, Rolling Stone. We were a very experienced and determined team, and set off with the feeling that nothing could stop us.

After a huge feast, we bedded down on grassy terraces beside the glacier. In the first light of the new day, we sweated under heavy loads as we approached the start of the route. It was a beautiful morning but something wasn't right. Conditions were too dry, too hot, too...something I couldn't quite fathom. The atmosphere was charged with foreboding. Most of us had the giggles, a sure sign that the subconscious was registering danger even though none was apparent. Around us was a deathly silence.

We came across an ancient rucksack with odds and ends scattered about. A stove, bits of rope, a boot complete with foot—that sort of thing. It didn't do much for my already dampened spirits.

It can be hard to suggest retreat when all appears to be going well, but one must never allow pride to cloud one's instinct in a dangerous environment. I voiced my concern. The team was divided, and those in favour of continuing wanted to discuss things at the bergschrund, the point where the face emerges from the glacier.

We stood at the foot of the wall. Above our heads rose 1,200 metres of vertical. I was afraid. It seemed to take forever to convince everyone of the folly of continuing in such warm dry conditions.

The return to Chamonix was finally agreed upon. Rob set off. He'd gone only four metres down a steep slope when it happened. Thousands of tonnes of rock, some blocks bigger than trucks, came screaming down from high on the face. The fear of death gripped us all as we struggled to get packs over our heads. Rob tried to regain the vague shelter of a small overhang just above us, but was hit in the side by a rock the size of a brick. He crumpled and began to slide down the slope towards a crevasse. His close friend and climbing partner, Jon Tinker leapt out into the firing line to save him. We watched horrified as rocks of all sizes fell among them. On reaching Rob and arresting his slide, Jon shielded Rob's body from further injury with his own. It was the bravest and maddest human action I'd ever witnessed.

We dragged Rob away from the wall and examined him. There was a huge gaping hole in his side and we sent someone to organise a chopper. Suddenly Rob leapt to his feet and insisted that he could walk down. Blood gushed from his side, completely soaking his pants and staining the snow. He looked at the wound, bewildered, and turned white.

'On second thoughts, get me that chopper!'

From 'At the edge', *Rock*, no. 12 (January–June 1990), p. 27.

It is innate mountain sense such as that that is so important in keeping one alive in the Himalaya. There was a good chance Muir would have to call on his intuition again as conditions often became treacherous on Everest's West Ridge.

Conditions in 1984 on the West Ridge, however, were kind to the climbers, apart from a week-long spell of marginal weather in September. As a result, they made excellent progress and by early October were in striking distance of the summit. They had negotiated the Khumbu Icefall, climbed the West Shoulder and established a high camp at 7900 m on the ridge. All six were in residence at the high camp on the night of 8 October. At 2.30am the next day, all except for Mackenzie, who was not feeling well, headed for the top. Muir takes up the story:

We were climbing in the Hornbein Couloir up to 8200 m. The snow conditions were 'fast' for cramponing up. I climbed from 8000 to 8200 m in just an hour. It was easily a fast enough pace for us to get to the top.

We had two radios, but Fred dropped one and it nearly hit a few of us on the way down. Then we stopped and I pulled out the other one to call base camp. It was incredibly windy—we were in the jet stream—even though we were in a relatively sheltered position.

I couldn't operate the radio properly so I pulled off one of my mitts for just a minute. I still couldn't get base camp; only a couple of words came through. I chucked it back in my pack.

In just that one minute my hands had gotten really cold. I couldn't get them warm again. I realised they were slightly damaged, slightly frostnipped.

Now it was very windy, I yelled to Craig and Peter, 'I'm going down.' Both nodded their heads. Kim and Fred were ahead, about 50 or 60 ft. The others waited until they looked down. We pointed down. They conferred and then pointed up.

There was no question in my mind—I was going down. I was worried about damage to my hands and the wind was incredible. I knew I would get frostbite if I continued. Peter, Craig and I headed down. I was still feeling clear-headed and strong and got ahead of the other two.

We were facing out. The slope was 40 degrees, not terribly steep, but it was icy and the wind was even stronger as we came out of the couloir and began the 150 m traverse to camp.

Then I sensed that something was wrong. I stopped in my tracks and looked around. I saw a person cartwheeling down. He almost hit Peter, who had stopped. Craig just kept on going down the North Face. It was absolutely horrifying.

He stopped on a shelf about 200 m below us and I went down to him but there was nothing we could do. We started to climb back up.

We saw the other two [From and Logan] descending. They had seen people very low, below the level of camp four and knew something was wrong.

Peter and I put our heads down and kept slowly slogging back up to the camp. The next time we looked up, another person went flying past us, only 20–30 m away. He went straight over the shelf, didn't even stop.

We got back to camp four. Kim had arrived so we knew it was Fred who had fallen. We radioed base camp, packed up the tents and went down. That was the last day of the expedition.<sup>2</sup>

It was a bitter end to an expedition that had promised so much (see image 20.1). On a day when it appeared that a majority of the team would reach the summit of Everest—the first time the West Ridge would have been climbed without supplementary oxygen—the team instead was rocked by the death of two of their members. Ironically, Fred From appeared to have fallen from very nearly the same spot where Craig Nottle had slipped.

The double tragedy on Everest's West Ridge was the death knell for the International Turkey Patrol. It seemed hard to believe that so much had gone wrong in just two years. After their blitz of the European Alps and then Changabang in 1982, it appeared they had the mountaineering world at their feet. They were young, full of energy and enthusiasm and had a wealth of climbing skills among them. They could handle almost any conditions that mountains could throw at them and they seemed to relish a storm-bound night high on a peak even more than a straightforward ascent in fine weather.

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2 J. Muir, Interview.

Tackling Himalayan mountains, particularly those more than 8000 m, is a risky business, even for the world's most skilled and experienced climbers. In just two Himalayan expeditions, the ITP had been decimated and a big hole had been knocked in the ranks of Australia's young mountaineers. First, Moorhead died in a fall from Makalu, after New Zealander Denz had been swept away by an avalanche earlier in the same trip, then Nottle and From tragically slipped at nearly the same place on Everest's West Ridge.

For Mackenzie and Muir, the loss of Nottle and From was a brutal blow. It took Mackenzie a long time to recover. After he returned to Kathmandu, he tried to drown his grief in Nepalese grog. For the rest of 1984 and much of 1985, he was too depressed to go back into the mountains and spent that period at his home.

For some time after the tragedy, Muir, too, could not find the heart to head back into the mountains and climb hard. He did return to the Himalaya in 1985, but, as he recalled, he 'was still shell-shocked from Everest'<sup>3</sup> and failed to make much progress on Shivling, a mountain in the Gangotri region of India. Muir and his wife, Brigitte, a Belgian who was a very skilled climber in her own right, were invited on the Shivling expedition by Terry Tremble, who organised the trip. The other member of the team was Ed Neve, who had been on the 1979 Dharamsura and 1982 Nanda Devi expeditions. Their attempt, which reached a high point of only 5900 m, suffered also from the early onset of the monsoon, which dumped much heavy, wet snow on the mountain and made conditions generally miserable.

Shivling had obviously made an impression on the Muirs, as they returned the next year, 1986, with Jon's old climbing partner Graeme Hill and his wife, Veronique, Brigitte's sister and also a very good climber.

One of the holiest mountains in the Indian Himalaya, Shivling is located near the source of the holy Ganges River. It rises as a single massive spike of rock and ice, somewhat in the same vein as Changabang, and is revered by Hindus as the divine phallus of Lord Shiva. It thus represents the life-originating powers of one of the most important gods in the Hindu pantheon.

For mountaineers, Shivling presents challenges similar to those on Changabang: soaring ridges of chiselled granite and sheer faces of ice and rock. The Australian foursome had exciting plans for the spectacular peak. While the two Hills, Brigitte Muir and the team's liaison officer, Doctor M. O. Vahanvati, would climb the original route up the North-West Ridge to the main summit, Jon Muir would attempt to climb solo a new route up the South-West Pillar to Shivling's western summit, 6505 m.

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3 Ibid.

The plan appeared reasonable on the surface of it, as Vahanvati was reportedly an experienced Himalayan climber so his inclusion in the climbing team would allow two ropes of two climbers rather than the more awkward number of three climbers. Vahanvati, however, who had even done some lead climbing on a previous Himalayan expedition, had difficulty from the very outset of the Shivering attempt in handling Himalayan conditions and, in a bizarre sequence of events, died while trying to ascend a fixed rope low on the mountain.

Graeme Hill's recollection of the fatal incident, and the lead-up to it, shed some light on what was reported very sketchily and somewhat inaccurately in the mountaineering literature at the time. Vahanvati had considerable difficulty, according to Hill, on the first attempt, which ended quickly when the two women were suffering headaches from the altitude and so retreated to advanced base camp. During that brief sortie, the liaison officer was lethargic, had nearly fallen when he dropped a water bottle and slipped while trying to retrieve it, did not have the energy to cook the evening meal (it was his turn) at advanced base camp and declined to either eat or drink at advanced base camp.

Brigitte Muir, who had climbed with Vahanvati on the first attempt, refused to rope up with him again and Veronique Hill decided that she too would not participate in another attempt. That left Graeme Hill, who agreed to another attempt when Vahanvati, despite his refusal to eat or drink again the next morning at advanced base camp, insisted he was still fit to climb. Hill knew that he was going to have to do all the hard work on the route and ascertained, after some apparent misunderstandings, that the liaison officer had experience in jumaring up fixed ropes, a technique that would undoubtedly be required often for Vahanvati to follow Hill.

Things quickly went wrong again, as Hill recalled:

To regain the ridge, I had first climbed up mixed ground, then up a short, steep pitch, possibly slightly overhung, to a large ledge. I expected the LO [liaison officer] to jumar up the steep section after me. I waited a long time for him to appear. It was warm and sunny, so I rested and ate a bit of food. But where was the LO?

Then I heard some noises. I went to the top of the rope and saw Vahanvati only five metres below, hanging on the rope. 'I'm dying,' he gasped, 'I need food and water.' I told him to throw away his pack and I lowered him down another jumar. It was very likely that his harness was pulling up tightly on his diaphragm, making it very difficult for him to breathe. He was literally suffocating.

I went back to the gear cache and got some food and water. When I got back to him he was unconscious. I knew I had to get to him, but at first I couldn't get down. How do you get down a tight rope when you've got only one jumar and can't get on the rope to abseil? Eventually I rigged up a reverse jumar system and lowered myself down.

I couldn't feel a pulse. I looked in his eyes. He was gone. We were spinning around on the rope. I gave him a few thumps on the chest as best I could; I tried everything I could think of but couldn't revive him. He was dead.

I pulled a rope out of his pack and lowered him down. Ironically, a couple of metres down there was a good stance. Had he known how to reverse jumar, he would have survived. He must have been suffering terribly from dehydration. It was a hot, sunny day and he was wearing a lot of clothing—thermal underwear, pile jacket, duvet.<sup>4</sup>

The Australians then walked out to the nearest village to report the death to the Indian authorities. The subsequent recovery of the body by a group of Indian climbers from a nearby mountaineering school led to some misunderstanding. By the time the party arrived, Shivling had been lashed by a big storm and Vahanvati's body, minus the duvet, which Hill had removed, was frozen into the green ice. The Indian climbers apparently concluded that the liaison officer had died of exposure due to the negligence of the Australian team.

The unfortunate misunderstanding with the Indian authorities, and the shock of Vahanvati's death in most unusual circumstances, cast a pall over the team. The decision was eventually made, however, to continue the attempt on Shivling but with changed tactics. Veronique Hill retired from the climbing, so Graeme Hill joined the two Muirs on the attempt on the South-West Pillar.

The trio adopted an approach to the climb called 'capsule style'—somewhat of a compromise between siege tactics and true alpine style. A capsule-style ascent would start with the adoption of siege-style tactics, use of fixed ropes and multiple carries of gear, from the base of the mountain to the first camp. The last climber up would remove the fixed ropes and carry them up to the camp. The process would then be repeated between the next pair of camps. Capsule style allows a team to remain on a route for a long time but requires much carrying of heavy loads. Unlike siege style, however, there is no connection with the bottom of the mountain and a descent forced by deteriorating conditions can be just as problematical as in an alpine-style attempt.

The three Australians employed the capsule-style tactics to good effect and, in 14 days of continuous climbing and load carrying, surmounted the South-West Pillar of Shivling—the last of the major ridges to be climbed—and stood on the mountain's western summit. The route gave them a taste of virtually every type of climbing the Himalaya had to offer (see image 20.2). 'The first third was snow and ice,' Jon Muir said, 'the second third mixed, and the top third rock.'<sup>5</sup>

4 G. Hill, Interview.

5 J. Muir, Interview.

Hill's account of one of his leads high on the ridge gives an idea of the delicacy and standard of the climbing:

The climbing was getting trickier, and I had changed into my friction boots to aid progress. With a light rack of gear I bridged off up the next pitch, pushing as much as I could rather than pulling on anything that looked loose. The granite was badly shattered in places, and the runners were mostly placed behind suspicious-looking flakes, but I reasoned that if I had enough of them one would hold before I hit my belayer. The bridging got steeper and finally led to a short overhang which was disposed of with a few quick layback moves, a technique more suited to rockclimbing at home on Mt Keira than here at 6,000 metres.<sup>6</sup>

Muir's assessment of the climbing difficulties corroborated Hill's impressions: 'There was a lot of grade 16 to 18 rock climbing, with the odd pitch of 20 or 21. There was some aid-climbing [where the climber uses hardware placed on the mountain to aid his upward progress] at A2, A3 and A4 standard.'<sup>7</sup> In fact, Muir led the crux pitch, a seven-hour struggle up a long corner system that he rated at 21, A4.

The ascent of the South-West Pillar of Shivling eclipsed the 1982 ITP ascent of Changabang in technical difficulty. It was just as impressive because of the small size of the team, all three of whom shared the leading and the onerous load carrying during the 14 days of climbing.

For Jon Muir, it was a welcome move back into the ranks of successful Australian Himalayan mountaineers. After the disappointment and tragedy on the West Ridge of Mt Everest in 1984 and the earlier unsuccessful attempt on Shivling, Muir's very strong performance on the South-West Pillar in 1986 put him back at the forefront of Australian alpinists. He did not rest on his laurels. For the third year in succession, he was in India's Gangotri region in 1987, for a trip that proved he had phenomenal strength as well as remarkable technical skill to display in the Himalaya.

Again in 1987, Muir climbed with his wife, Brigitte, along with Australians Louise Shepherd, Geoff Little and New Zealander Lydia Bradey, who was later to be involved in a very controversial claimed ascent of Mt Everest. Shepherd, one of Australia's leading rock climbers, was on her first trip to the Himalaya.

The team's objectives lay in the Kedarnath Range, just next to Shivling, and consisted of a traverse of Kedarnath Dome (6830 m) and Kedarnath Peak (6968 m), as well as an attempt on the East Face of neighbouring Meru Peak.

<sup>6</sup> Hill, G. 1986, 'Shivling sojourn', *Wild*, no. 22 (Spring), pp. 44–8.

<sup>7</sup> J. Muir, Interview.

Although not technically difficult, the traverse of the Kedarnath mountains was a very serious undertaking as it involved a long, committing climb at high altitude into positions from which retreat would be difficult. The team's first attempt at the traverse proved just how tricky an apparently straightforward technical climb could be in the high Himalaya, as Muir wrote:

We bivvied at 16,500 ft [5029 m] on Kedarnath Dome but Louise was unable to go further due to the altitude. At Bivvy 2 at 18,500 ft [5639 m] Geoff and Brigitte suffered similarly and only Lydia and I headed off on the 20th [May] to the third bivvy at 20,500 ft [6248 m]. Feeling strong and confident, we traversed Kedarnath Dome [22,500 ft, 6858 m] to a fourth bivvy in a 'schrund at 22,000 ft [6706 m] on the col between the Dome and Kedarnath Peak. The next day we were trapped by a storm and with Lydia now suffering from going too high, too fast, our situation was very serious.

On the 23rd, the 6th day of the climb, we had to descend in the storm and it turned into a true epic. With no rope we had to descend difficult serac barriers in appallingly soft snow and were hit by six avalanches. After a long and frightening struggle that went on all day, we waited, in an apparently safe spot with avalanches coming down on both sides of us, for nightfall. We could then continue descending to our sixth bivvy at the foot of the face. All next day was needed to plough our way back to ABC [advanced base camp], and on the 25th we reached Base Camp, weary and wasted.<sup>8</sup>

Little and Brigitte Muir had battled on also and eventually reached the top of Kedarnath Dome, which at least was some consolation for them. The team's other climbing plans, however, had to be modified. Little, Bradey and Brigitte Muir retreated to join the large 1987 New Zealand Karakoram expedition, while Shepherd went down the valley for a while to recover from her first bout with high altitude. That left Jon Muir, but he had suffered frost-nip on his fingers and toes during his earlier ordeal and was forced to abandon his solo attempt on Meru. He was not, however, finished with the Kedarnath peaks.

In an amazing display of speed and stamina, he raced across the traverse, this time in the opposite order, in just 41 hours. The ascent of Kedarnath Peak, the higher of the two summits, was completed under moonlight in beautiful conditions, but when storm clouds began to appear as he rested at the col, Muir had visions of a repeat of his earlier epic:

[H]aunted by our epic three weeks before, I quickly packed and moved on, feeling hunted. Intermittent snow storms swept over me as I traversed over Kedarnath Dome again. Starting down the northeast ridge and then dropping down the northwest face, I lost height rapidly. By making a number of controlled bum slides, I managed to descend the 7,000 ft [2134 m] to the glacier in two hours and another four hours to advance base by dark.<sup>9</sup>

8 Muir, J. and Bradey, L. 1987, 'Gangotri', *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, September, pp. 22–3.

9 Ibid.

Meanwhile, Muir's teammate Geoff Little was pulling off another coup for Australian Himalayan mountaineering in the Karakoram. The New Zealand expedition that he and Brigitte Muir had joined was originally targeting two massive peaks—Gasherbrum I (Hidden Peak), 8068 m, and Baltoro Kangri (Golden Throne), 7300 m—but the latter was declared out of bounds because of its proximity to the border clashes between Pakistan and India.

The 15-strong team therefore set to work on Gasherbrum I. They quickly discovered that the mountain was also beset by high risks—this time, of a less anthropogenic nature. Their intended line of ascent—via a Japanese route up a couloir and through a series of icefalls on the North-West Ridge/Face—was abandoned due to avalanche danger. Their high point was only 6500 m. A smaller group then teamed with some Basque climbers to attempt a route originally climbed by Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, but were turned back at 6800 m by dangerous conditions. In fact, the whole mountain was in a treacherous state. Four Pakistani climbers were swept to their deaths by an avalanche, an incident that convinced most of the New Zealand team to forgo any further attempts on the peak.

Three of the expedition members, on the other hand, did not want to come away from the Karakoram empty-handed. Just nearby lay Gasherbrum II—at 8035 m, one of the world's 14 highest mountains and within easy striking distance from base camp. The only problem was a bureaucratic one; they held no permit for Gasherbrum II.

That obstacle was overcome when the Pakistani liaison officer unofficially approved the attempt in return for a good deed the New Zealanders had done for one of his countrymen. They had saved the life of a Pakistani army officer who had fallen into a deep crevasse on the Gasherbrum Glacier. The liaison officer no doubt thought turning a blind eye to the Gasherbrum II attempt was an appropriate gesture of gratitude for the rescue.

Still, there was little time remaining; in fact, just time enough for a single, alpine-style strike. That, however, was enough for Bradey, Little and New Zealander Carol McDermott to charge up the South-East Ridge, the route of the original French ascent. It took the trio only three days from camp one, low on the Gasherbrum I/II massif, to snatch the last-ditch victory at the very end of the expedition.

The Australian summiteer, Geoff Little, was a relative newcomer to Himalayan climbing, and indeed to alpine climbing. Although Little had been rock climbing since 1975—primarily at Mt Arapiles and the Grampian ranges—he did not get a start in alpine climbing until 1986 with a trip to New Zealand. He did not waste any

time tackling the big ones. ‘The second day I had crampons on I climbed Mt Cook,’ Little said, ‘and then later in the same trip I got up Tasman [New Zealand’s second-highest peak].’<sup>10</sup>

Later in 1986, Little joined Lydia Bradey for a short trip to the Kulu Valley in the Indian Himalaya, where they climbed a number of smaller peaks in the 5000–5800 m height range. Gasherbrum II, then, was a very big step up in altitude for Little.

Gasherbrum II was also a big step for Australian Himalayan mountaineering. It was only the third 8000 m peak climbed by an Australian; the first two were Everest in 1984 and the Army Alpine Association (AAA) expedition’s ascent of Broad Peak in 1986. Little’s climb of Gasherbrum II was important also in that it was not connected with Mt Everest, as either a training climb for or an attempt on the world’s highest peak. It represented a maturing and broadening of Australian interest to many diverse areas of the Greater Himalaya—a trend that was gathering momentum in the mid-1980s.

Only months after his marathon performance on the Kedarnath peaks, Jon Muir was back in the Himalaya again. He was a member of Peter Hillary’s four-man team that attempted the South-West Pillar of Mt Everest but was beaten back by the intense cold and unusually vicious winds of the post-monsoon season.

The trips to Shivling, the traverse of the Kedarnath Range and the attempts on Mt Everest seemed like a well-planned build-up for the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE). Muir, however, obviously did not plan it that way. In fact, even after he returned from the 1987 Everest attempt, he still did not know that he would be going on the ABEE, which was then only a few months away.

I had answered an ad back in 1985 and applied for the ABEE then. But then this letter came, and I was asked to pay money—instalments of \$1000, \$2000, etc., over the next three years. I couldn’t afford it. I didn’t work; I just climbed.

I got back from the South-West Pillar expedition to Everest on 19 November 1987, and just before Christmas I got a phone call from the ABC [Australian Broadcasting Corporation]. They wanted me to go along on the ABEE and shoot film for them. And they would pay for it! So a couple of months later I was back at Everest again.<sup>11</sup>

It was a good move—for the ABEE and for Muir himself. The ABEE knew it was getting one of Australia’s best Himalayan mountaineers and had, in fact, lobbied hard with the Australian Bicentennial Commission for Muir’s inclusion as a climber/cameraman. It was, however, a different Jon Muir from the brash young climber who went to Changabang in 1982. He still had enormous energy and enthusiasm

<sup>10</sup> G. Little, Interview.

<sup>11</sup> J. Muir, Interview.

#### HIMALAYAN DREAMING

and, of course, that zany sense of humour, but gone forever was the innocence of the early days of the ITP. Muir had seen too many of his close friends perish in the Himalaya and he was well aware of the hazards he would face yet again. He was fit, strong and skilled and by 1988, had amassed the depth of experience in the mountains that made him the complete Himalayan mountaineer.

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