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## A strained relationship

Jon Muir's very late inclusion on the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) team was beneficial to him for more reasons than just the financial. As long as he thought the ABEE was too expensive for him and that there was no possibility of participating in the expedition, he could happily climb away on Himalayan mountains of his choosing, oblivious to the developments that were occurring in the organisation of the ABEE. The tortuous task of getting the ABEE from the drawing boards of Australian meeting rooms to the base of the Khumbu Icefall was someone else's problem—and quite a problem it turned out to be.

Planning proceeded throughout 1985 and into 1986 on the basis of the understanding reached between the Army Alpine Association (AAA) and the civilian group two years earlier (see Chapter 16). The groundwork for the execution of the expedition began to be laid. Alternative types of equipment were investigated and tested, the all-important matter of food was considered in earnest and more support, in the form of donations, discounts and cash gifts, was actively sought.

By mid-1986, however, some hard decisions had to be made about personnel and logistics. Although the AAA and the civilian group wanted to retain their own routes in their own chosen styles, it was becoming increasingly clear to the civilians that that degree of freedom just was not feasible with the resources at hand. The AAA had prepared a detailed plan for the West Ridge and it required more resources than the ABEE looked likely to raise. The route would be attempted in the traditional (siege) style, which would require a lot of fixed rope, food, tents, anchors, carabiners and all the other paraphernalia required for high-altitude mountaineering. More specifically, the plan called for 12 AAA climbers, five camps on the ridge, the use of bottled oxygen above 7700 m and the installation of a winch on the Lho La to haul loads up the steep headwall below. In addition, it would require a large number of Sherpas as high-altitude porters and, by 1988, Sherpas had become very expensive indeed. When the sums were done, the estimated cost of the AAA West Ridge route

was about five times that of the civilian South Col attempt. There was concern among some civilians that the West Ridge route could easily have consumed all of the resources available to the ABEE.

Mike Rheinberger put the problem succinctly:

It became obvious that the two approaches to climbing the mountain were completely out of kilter. The army plan called for a massive assault on the West Ridge involving as many as 16 climbers, just as many Sherpas, and huge amounts of oxygen...the original estimates were for something like 100 bottles. It was going to be a mega-attempt on the West Ridge, whereas we were still wishing to go lightweight style on the South Col route.<sup>1</sup>

A related problem was the number of qualified climbers. Early on, the AAA had set out criteria for inclusion in the army part of the ABEE team:

1. contribute \$5000 towards the expedition
2. have had Himalayan experience and climbed to 20 000 ft (6000 m)
3. ability to put team interests before individual interests
4. be able to climb Alpine Grade 3
5. be fit, determined and capable of interacting with other members, nationalities and cultures.<sup>2</sup>

The crunch came after the 1986 Broad Peak expedition when the AAA had to put forward its team for the Everest attempt. At that time, at most seven AAA members satisfied the well-known selection criteria. Two additional AAA climbers would have qualified had they made the necessary financial commitment. Had they done so, the AAA would still have been well short of the number of qualified mountaineers it needed to attempt the West Ridge in the traditional style. Furthermore, it could be argued that, given the seriousness of the West Ridge route, qualified climbers should have had several Himalayan expeditions under their belt and should have climbed to well above 20 000 ft (6000 m).

The matter came to a head at the October 1986 ABEE board meeting. After a prolonged and sometimes heated discussion, it was reluctantly decided that the two teams—AAA and civilians—would combine forces and attempt only one route. It was a decision forced on the board by the realities of available resources and the number of qualified climbers. There simply was little choice. The board members—civilian and military—agreed that it was better to have one strong team put at least one Australian on top of Everest during the bicentenary than to have two separate teams each get 90 per cent of the way up their routes.

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1 M. Rheinberger, Interview.

2 Jim Truscott maintained that criterion no. 5 was 'an ABEE add-on and not part of the AAA criteria'.

The decision to form one team precipitated considerable conflict within the ranks of the AAA, a rift that plagued the final build-up to the ABEE and, unfortunately, soured relationships during the expedition itself. Like most conflicts that occur during the course of Himalayan expeditions, this one was rooted in differences of objectives, styles and philosophies—legitimate points of difference among climbers—and was overlaid and exacerbated by personality conflicts.

Underlying the conflict was the change of style necessitated by the merger of the two teams. Gone were the two separate styles originally proposed within the ‘umbrella’ expedition. Now there truly was one expedition and a modification to the traditional-style attempt with large numbers of Sherpas was a significant change. The compromise reached between the AAA and civilian board members called for a team of climbers to attempt the South Col route without the help of high-altitude porters—the philosophy always espoused by the civilians. The climbers themselves would do all the load carrying as well as the lead climbing. The use of supplementary oxygen was left to the discretion of the individual climbers, but enough would be taken for several summit attempts.

The merger also brought about a more subtle but very much more profound change to the original plan: a change to a single climbing philosophy. As long as the two-route concept was retained, the AAA could attempt the West Ridge with a more structured approach to the climb. There would be a more definitive chain of command with a clear division of responsibilities and organisation of personnel and equipment. And that approach would have made considerable sense in a traditional-style attempt with a large number of climbers and Sherpas, long lengths of fixed rope, large and well-stocked camps and a long time on the mountain. There was, however, no way a majority of the civilian climbers would have accepted that style of expedition. The AAA would have to compromise and accept a style of operation that was palatable to the civilians.

The civilians, however, had to make even more compromises. Gone was their original idea of a small, closely knit group to attempt Everest in lightweight style. Now there would be a large team and the attempt would be made with fixed camps and ropes. In essence, the expedition would be carried out in a style very similar to that which the military climbers were comfortable with, but without the use of high-altitude Sherpas. This one concession to their original idea seemed under threat from those AAA climbers (referred to, for convenience, as the ‘West Ridge group’) who still wanted a traditional-style attempt with the use of Sherpas to carry loads. As Peter Allen recalled, ‘When we combined, our [the civilians’] original idea was lost, but we continually fought a rearguard action for years to retain some sort of style, to climb the mountain without Sherpas.’<sup>3</sup>

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3 P. Allen, Interview.

After the October 1986 ABEE board meeting, the rift within the AAA deepened. There were several AAA climbers who were concerned to varying degrees about the merger of the teams and the abandonment of the West Ridge route. Jim Truscott was the most vocal, but Rick Moor, Brian Agnew, Terry McCullagh, Jim van Gelder, Andrew Smith and James Strohfeldt and perhaps others had reservations as well (van Gelder and Strohfeldt were, strictly speaking, members from the civilian side but had climbed on AAA expeditions and were closely associated with the AAA). Much of the anger and frustration that built up among some of the West Ridge group was vented towards Zac Zaharias, one of the AAA members of the ABEE board. It was Zaharias who initiated climbing contact with the Melbourne-based Everest aspirants by inviting Allen on the 1983 Nilgiri North expedition, and who, along with Peter Lambert, agreed in 1986 with Rheinberger's assessment that the AAA did not have the resources and manpower to mount a credible attempt on the West Ridge. Pat Cullinan too, however, supported the ABEE board's decision as the best for the AAA. He also felt that a single team on the South Col route had the best chance of success. Curiously, Cullinan, and to a large degree Lambert, were immune from the criticisms of the West Ridge group. Zaharias copped nearly all of it.

Many of the West Ridge group felt strongly that Zaharias had too quickly and easily abandoned the concept of an autonomous AAA attempt on Mt Everest. From their point of view, the primary objective was for the AAA, as a club, to mount its own expedition with its own members in its own style. It was something they strongly believed in and something they had worked very hard for throughout the 1980s. When the objective was changed significantly, they felt they had been sold out. The change of plans became known as 'Zac's betrayal'.

The change of objectives was particularly difficult for Truscott to accept. Jim Truscott had been a pillar of the AAA from its very start. He was one of two cadets who had taken up climbing even before the Peter Gration-inspired revitalisation of the AAA in the late 1970s. He was a member of the AAA's first expedition to the Himalaya—to Ganesh IV in 1981—and was nearly killed in the avalanche that blasted camp two. He had been involved in the AAA's plans for a 1988 Everest trip from the very start and laboured hard on behalf of the expedition. He marshalled support from various quarters within the army and investigated and tested gear for the ABEE team. He had worked very long for an army expedition to Mt Everest and the amalgamation with the civilians had irrevocably altered the style and ethos with which he thought an AAA team should attempt the mountain.

In addition, some within the West Ridge group felt honour-bound to push for more involvement by the AAA, and the army in general, in the expedition. Not only was it their style of leadership and organisation they strongly preferred, the army had contributed so much in the way of material and logistical support that if there had to be a merger, the single route should be attempted in the traditional AAA style.

There was yet another problem that the merging of the two teams caused for some of the AAA West Ridge group. As long as the AAA was attempting the West Ridge by itself in traditional style, a large climbing team would be required and every fit, reasonably experienced AAA mountaineer would be on the team. With the merger, however, there could be as few as five or six military climbers on the combined team. Suddenly there would be competition for places and some of those who would have gone on a West Ridge team would now be left at home.

Truscott, McCullagh and some of the others (for example, Rick Moor and Andrew Smith) of the West Ridge group did not give up their hopes for a separate West Ridge attempt even after the October 1986 ABEE board meeting. They continued to lobby Zaharias, Lambert and Cullinan—the three AAA members of the board—for a reversal of the decision to amalgamate teams. Their efforts were to no avail, however, as the ABEE board stuck to its decision to merge even when it appeared at one stage that the decision could cause a formal split in the ranks of the AAA climbers.

Zaharias copped much of the pressure. He said:

As late as 1987, we still had a lot of letters coming to us demanding that we split and have our own routes. I went to Jim Truscott and said, ‘You want the West Ridge? You take it, and all the climbers you reckon we’ve got.’ I knew we didn’t have enough climbers with the experience and judgment to do a demanding route like the West Ridge.<sup>4</sup>

The question of what to do with the West Ridge permit was caught up in some interesting international politics. Long after the Australian permit for the South Col route had been granted, Nepalese authorities sanctioned the huge tri-nation (China, Japan, Nepal) expedition for the same route (see Chapter 22). The tri-nation team, in fact, also held a permit for the North Ridge on the Tibetan side of the mountain and hoped to do a double traverse of Mt Everest. At one stage, it looked like the ABEE could be forced off the South-East Ridge (South Col) route, but the friendly relations between Nepal and Australia (enhanced by the Nepalese King’s visit to Australia about that time) and the fact that the then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, was Chief Patron of the ABEE, saved the day. Nevertheless, the ABEE board thought it prudent to retain the West Ridge permit.

By early 1987, with only a year to go to the climb itself, it was time for the team members to bury their differences and pull together for the final preparations. Yet, if anything, the problems worsened during the first half of 1987. Certainly communication was a big problem. Truscott and others in the West Ridge group

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4 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

complained that they were not consulted enough about ABEE board decisions and Zaharias and Lambert noted that important AAA decisions were made when they were absent from the meetings.

Unfortunately, at this point, the actions of some within the West Ridge group raised the level of tension even higher. For example, an open letter was written to the board in which the case for a separate AAA attempt on the West Ridge was raised yet again in a forceful, if somewhat rambling and confused, way. The letter went on, however, to attack the motives and personal integrity of ABEE board members. Also, there was an attempt to add another AAA representative to the board, thus tipping the balance of power in favour of the AAA over the civilian group. At one point, Peter Lambert was asked directly to step aside from the ABEE board, presumably to make way for someone with greater leanings towards the views of the West Ridge group.

The selection of the AAA part of the climbing team worsened the split, as Lambert recalled:

Zac and I did a list, based on experience, ability, personality, temperament, etc. We could choose only six or eight. When we published the list and some people saw that we hadn't included them, we had all hell to pay. Most of the anger was directed at Zac, although I had as much to do with the decisions as he did.<sup>5</sup>

Peter Lambert was probably the AAA member most sceptical about their chances of success if they were to stick with their own attempt on the West Ridge: 'I lost my faith in the ability of the AAA to do anything other than a "Scott-of-the-Antarctic" type expedition. If they had gone for the West Ridge, there's no way they'd have gotten to the top.'<sup>6</sup> Not surprisingly, Pat Cullinan, the leader of the original West Ridge team, disagreed: 'Personally, I believe that with the numbers we had plus Sherpa support, the plan would have worked.'<sup>7</sup>

The split between Zaharias/Lambert and Truscott and the others of the West Ridge group could easily have become a formal split within the AAA. 'Zac and I had very real fears that if the AAA went its own way,' Lambert said, 'we'd go with the civilians.'<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, just as the AAA seemed as divided as ever during the final hectic preparations for the trip, relations with the civilians could hardly have been better. To an outsider, the AAA–civilian interface would have been the most likely point of conflict, but the inclusion of civilians on AAA expeditions, such as Nilgiri North and Broad Peak, had led to an excellent working relationship. Although many ABEE members, civilian and military alike, made significant contributions to the planning

<sup>5</sup> P. Lambert, Interview.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> P. Cullinan, Interview.

<sup>8</sup> P. Lambert, Interview.

and execution of the expedition, Zaharias and Lambert were particularly impressed with the knowledge and expertise that Peter Allen and Mike Rheinberger brought to the ABEE.

‘Peter Allen’s experience was of tremendous value,’ Lambert recalled:

The AAA would say, ‘Let’s take a tonne of carabiners because we might need them’, while Allen would say, ‘Let’s take 35 carabiners because that’s how many I know I’ll need.’ Peter and Mike Rheinberger were very good at this sort of organisational detail. They really knew what they were doing. In fact, the work that Peter and Mike put in was the most significant for the success of the expedition. They had a much more measured, experienced and rational response than the AAA to the requirements of the expedition.<sup>9</sup>

Another person who contributed much to the organisational development of the ABEE was Charlie Hart, managing director of a Brisbane-based company, Proplan, which specialised in critical path planning and programming. Hart’s computer services were most useful in keeping track of the more than 1000 different items that the ABEE took to Mt Everest.

Although attention to organisational detail is undeniably important to the success of an expedition as big as the ABEE, leadership is even more critical. When a large number of individualistic, highly motivated mountaineers, each with their own personal ambitions, are brought together in the same expedition, the task of keeping them working together as a team effectively and efficiently can be a monumental one. Choosing a leader to undertake that task was a problem the ABEE board was grappling with in mid-1986.

There was one rather clear choice. Rheinberger had the experience and leadership skills to head the ABEE and there was considerable support within the board for his appointment. In fact, Pat Cullinan formally requested his appointment as leader. The board, however, decided that the leader and team doctor should not climb above camp two in the Western Cwm (a similar restriction applied to the leader and doctor of the 1985 New Zealand Alpine Club Everest expedition). As Rheinberger had a strong personal desire to reach the summit, he declined the offer to be leader. The ABEE board was then forced to take the rather unusual step of drawing up a set of selection criteria and searching for a group of suitable candidates.

Five potential leaders—three from the military and two civilians—were eventually identified and evaluated. They were: Brigadier Tony Hammett, a regular soldier and a former Olympian; Major General Sharpe, an Army Reservist and former Commander of the 2nd Division; Lieutenant Colonel Paul Feeney, an Army Reservist with some mountaineering experience; Peter Arriens, a civilian who had

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9 Ibid.

served as officer-in-charge of the Antarctic Division's Mawson Base; and Austin Brookes, a New Zealand-based mountaineer who had led two previous Himalayan expeditions.

The board opted for Brookes. He easily had the most experience in leading Himalayan expeditions; in fact, he was the only one of the five candidates to have led a Himalayan climbing trip. Indeed, it was Brookes who led the 1985 New Zealand attempt on the north side of Everest, the one so plagued by avalanches that the team was lucky to escape without loss of life. Mike Rheinberger and Peter Allen had been climbers on that expedition, so were in an excellent position to judge Brookes' leadership qualities. Their strong recommendations no doubt had much to do with Brookes' selection.

On one point, though, Brookes nearly did not qualify. A requirement for selection to the ABEE was Australian citizenship and Brookes, originally from Great Britain and a longstanding New Zealand resident, had just moved to Australia and, providentially, had just begun the process of obtaining Australian citizenship. In every other way, however, he was well qualified to lead the ABEE.

His climbing career started about as far away from the South Island of New Zealand that one could possibly go: arctic Norway and Sweden. There he and a friend from England climbed a few mountains and, in the process, Brookes was bitten by the climbing bug. On returning home, he became involved in rock climbing through the Leeds University climbing community and, like many English climbers, subsequently made several trips to the French Alps and the Dolomites.

Brookes moved to New Zealand in 1962 to take up a teaching position in South Island and quickly became involved in mountaineering in the Southern Alps through the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC). He focused on the Darran Mountains of Fiordland, where he made seven first ascents of routes, and the Mt Cook district, where he was on the first ascent of the Sheila Face of Mt Cook itself.

After a brief return to the United Kingdom in 1968–70, when he climbed extensively in Wales and the Lakes District, he was back in the mountains of New Zealand and broadened his skills to include ski-mountaineering. In 1973, Brookes began to travel further afield for his adventures; he was employed as a survival instructor for an American group in Antarctica. Three years later, he was leader of a most successful New Zealand expedition to Cerro Stokes and Aconcagua in South America. The team made three first ascents and climbed the Polish Direct route on Aconcagua, the highest mountain outside the Himalaya.

In 1981, Brookes got his chance to not only climb in the Himalaya, but to lead a New Zealand expedition to one of the highest remaining unclimbed mountains in the world: 7703 m Molamenqing in Tibet. The expedition was successful and

the ascent still stands as the highest virgin peak climbed by a New Zealand team. In 1985, of course, Brookes was again in the Himalaya, this time leading the New Zealand expedition to the north side of Everest.

This very impressive background of mountaineering experience was a great boost to Brookes in the ABEE leadership selection process, but so too perhaps was his relaxed attitude. ‘I was invited for an evening at Middle Head Barracks in Sydney,’ he recalled. ‘I didn’t realise it was the selection evening so consequently I didn’t take it too seriously. I was quite surprised when I found out that I’d got the job.’<sup>10</sup>

Brookes was soon plunged into the thick of the planning action. Joined by Zaharias and Allen to form an executive committee to handle the day-to-day operation of the expedition, he and his colleagues had less than 18 months to get the largest Himalayan expedition ever mounted from Australia to Everest base camp and hopefully then to the top of the mountain.

If Brookes had harboured any concerns about the organisation of the ABEE during the critical final year before departure for Nepal, he need not have. With the full support of the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA), the army and a host of sponsors, and with the considerable organisational skill and drive of the AAA coupled with the experience of Peter Allen and Mike Rheinberger, there was nothing to worry about. Task leaders were assigned to look after every aspect of the expedition, from communications and food to equipment and oxygen. No detail was omitted. In December 1987, most of the ABEE equipment and supplies were flown from Richmond Air Force Base in a C-130 Hercules aircraft to Kathmandu. Then, in a testament to the ABEE’s organisational skill, and to Peter Lambert’s nous as ‘movements’ task leader, the 6 tonnes of gear cleared Nepalese customs in only four hours—a record (see image 21.1).

The gear was then in Nepal and so too, a few months later, would be the climbers. All that remained was for one or more of the Australians to stand on top of Mt Everest. That three Australians did eventually climb the mountain is now history and, according to the international mountaineering press, not particularly noteworthy history. That was a big injustice. The magnificent achievement of the ABEE deserved much better recognition. It was an outstanding effort, characterised by grim determination and exceedingly hard work, even by Himalayan standards, and by a large measure of drama. Just when it appeared all of the hard work would be in vain, success was snatched at the very last moment in a heart-stopping drive for the summit against all odds.

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10 A. Brookes, Personal communication, 1 November 1989.

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.