

22

ABEE: the climb

The dramatic finish to the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) was a fitting climax to a tremendous team effort, one that had begun years earlier with the first training climbs and planning meetings. The final stage of the 1988 Australian success on Mt Everest, however, began where all of the preparation, planning and training left off: at the foot of the mountain (see images 22.1, 22.2 and 22.3). For those attempting Everest by the South Col route, there is no more daunting start to a climb than the Khumbu Icefall.

‘When you arrive at Base Camp,’ Pat Cullinan recalled, ‘you’re face-to-face with Everest. It’s right in front of you. But what’s really staring you in the face is this massive icefall.’¹

Jim Truscott was no less impressed: ‘We’d always look up at this damn thing and wonder how we were going to come to terms with it. I went through the Icefall 21 times on the expedition and I kept thinking, if it’s going to happen to you, it’s probably going to happen in the Icefall.’²

Perhaps the Australians had good reason to be wary of the Khumbu Icefall and its considerable reputation for nasty surprises. During the 1972 British attempt on the South-West Face of Everest, an Australian, Tony Tighe, who was helping at base camp, was tragically killed in the icefall during the final days of the expedition. Chris Bonington, the expedition leader, had allowed Tighe to go up the icefall route:

[T]o reward him [for his work at base camp] I agreed to him accompanying Sherpas on a trip to Camp I to bring down the final loads, so that he should enjoy the wonderful view up the Western Cwm. Moving a little more slowly than the Sherpas,

1 P. Cullinan in Ryan, R. (dir) and Humphrey, S. (prod.) 1989, *One More Step. The Australian Defence Force on Everest 1988*, Video by Australian Army and Film Australia.

2 J. Truscott in *ibid*.

he was caught when an ice tower collapsed. It could have happened to any of us—such is the cruel Russian roulette of the Khumbu Icefall where it is impossible to guarantee a safe route.³

The treachery of the icefall was further impressed on the 1988 Australian team when they discovered early in the trip the bodies of two Sherpas killed in the icefall during the Canadian expedition of 1982.

The icefall is a serious matter for any climber who ventures into it, but it was far more serious for the ABEE team. Nearly all expeditions that attempt Mt Everest via the South Col route employ Sherpas as high-altitude porters. The Sherpas usually have to put the route through the icefall and then make repeated trips through it to stock the higher camps. The mountaineers themselves then need to make only a very few trips through the icefall and thus minimise their exposure to the danger. By eschewing the use of high-altitude porters, the Australian climbers were not only making a lot more work for themselves, they were exposing themselves to considerably more danger. They would have to do all the dirty work themselves by making repeated backbreaking load hauls through the labyrinth of tottering ice towers and menacing crevasses.

What is the Khumbu Icefall really like and what makes it so treacherous? It is perhaps best described as 100–200 massive blocks of ice the size of three or four-storey buildings and 100–200 massive crevasses thrown together in a chaotic jumble. It is formed by the ice of the Western Cwm flowing over the lip of the cwm for about 600 vertical metres down to the floor of the upper Khumbu Valley. The ice is always moving, albeit slowly, and that motion leads to blocks suddenly tumbling over and crevasses unexpectedly opening where there was smooth snow seconds earlier. ‘Terrible teetering towers’ is how Mike Rheinberger described the seracs or ice towers. ‘Lying in your sleeping-bag at base camp,’ he recalled, ‘you’d hear rumbles and crunches in the icefall all through the night.’⁴ Truscott added, ‘We had names for parts of the icefall, like the Marblefield, the Bowl [which later disintegrated] and Hideous Hanging Seracs.’⁵

As they would have to spend so much time in the icefall, the ABEE team took much care in choosing and securing the best possible route. The route finding was entrusted to ‘Dad’s Army’, a five-man climbing unit headed by Rheinberger and including Jon Muir, Jim Truscott, Phil Pitham and James Strohfeldt. Austin Brookes, in following the strategy he used in the 1985 New Zealand expedition to Everest, had divided up the team into four units of four or five climbers each. It made much

3 Bonington, C. 1989, *Mountaineer*, Diadem Books, London, ch. 5.

4 M. Rheinberger, Interview.

5 J. Truscott, Personal communication.

sense to send Dad's Army into the icefall first as Rheinberger and Muir had been through it just months earlier in the 1987 attempt on the South Pillar so had a good idea of how to attack it.

They accomplished the task in good time overall and with a minimum of snags. 'The Icefall was reasonably straightforward because of the experience of Mike Rheinberger and Jon Muir,' Brookes pointed out, 'without them it would have been a much bigger obstacle. It was always the most dangerous part of the route—and it was dangerous. The numerous journeys every climber had to make to shift the gear to Camp II was a real strain on the nerves.'⁶

The route was secured with fixed ropes and aluminium ladders to bridge crevasses and scale ice walls (see image 22.4). In all, nearly 4000 m of rope was fixed and 50 ladders of various lengths were put in place. It was slow and painstaking work but it was needed to maximise safety for the numerous carries each climber would have to make through the icefall.

Then the drudgery began: getting more than 1 tonne of gear through the icefall and up into the cwm for the attempt on the mountain itself. Strohfeldt vividly described what those carries through the icefall were like:

I remember also how easy the danger was to come to terms with—at least at one level. The Icefall had to be passed in order to climb the mountain, so we simply had to do it as often as necessary. Make it as safe as possible, pause, then run under a serac; clip onto the fixed rope to jump a crevasse; knock the snow off one's crampons to balance across an aluminium bridge; leave the rest to fate! The Icefall never got boring. It flowed and fluxed, sometimes whole sections buckling and heaving overnight, tearing aluminium ladders to pieces and stretching ropes whip tight. Sometimes it was knee deep in new snow, in others blunt crampons would skid and screech on the hard ice. It was never safe; but it was always one hell of a place to be.⁷

Muir would not argue with Strohfeldt's description as he had another close call, reminiscent of his lucky escape from the icefall in 1987:

I was flying through the air down a massive crevasse. Eight metres down, the fixed line stopped me with a jolt which almost ripped the rope from my hands. The collapsed snow bridge kept going down into bottomless blue depths. The facts of the situation, and the advice for such a predicament, raced through my head—you're alone, the crevasse is very deep, you're tired; do something quick!⁸

Muir took his own advice and extricated himself quickly from the crevasse.

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

7 J. Strohfeldt in Wilby, S. 1989, *Beyond the Icefall*, Child & Associates, Sydney, ch. 5.

8 Muir, J. 1989, 'To the roof of the world', *Wild*, no. 31 (Summer), pp. 36–9.

Not all feelings about the icefall were negative. Paul Bayne recalled its austere beauty as one of the highlights of the expedition:

Trips through the icefall were a real high point for me, for the beauty of it. It was an amazingly wild and fantastic place. I remember sometimes descending in afternoon storms, having dumped heavy loads, and coming down through the mist listening to the walkman, looking around at the wild beauty of the place. But it was never a place I wanted to hang around.⁹

Beyond the icefall lay the Western Cwm and although passage through it was not completely safe, as avalanches threatened from Everest's West Shoulder and the Nuptse Wall, it was less dangerous than the icefall. Camp one was established on the lip of the cwm, just above the top of the icefall, and camp two was set up near the head of the cwm, at the head of the giant horseshoe formed by Everest, Lhotse and Nuptse.

The problems of load carrying from camp one to two lay not in technical difficulty or in danger, but in the energy-sapping struggle through soft snow in searing heat up a gently inclined slope. The Western Cwm, with its floor and walls of ice and snow, is probably one of the world's biggest natural solar reflectors. Anyone caught out in it with a heavy load in the middle of the day—as many who made the carry from base camp to camp two in a single push were—would be subject to severe heat exhaustion and dehydration. The ABEE climbers were getting a good lesson in what Sherpas often had to go through on behalf of their Western employers.

The statistics of the load carrying, as recounted by Sorrel Wilby in her book *Beyond the Icefall*, tell an impressive story of what the Australians had really undertaken by not using high-altitude porters.

From Base Camp to Camp I or II the climbers could feasibly carry loads weighing 12–20 kilograms, but higher on the hill, carries between Camp III and the 8,000-metre South Col would amount to only 7 or 8 kilograms. In real terms, that meant most climbers would have to make two or three trips into the Icefall with ladders and ropes, three trips from Base Camp to Camp I, another five or six load carries right through from Base Camp to Camp II, and at least three trips up to Camp III from the Western Cwm. If they still had any energy left, they would have to do at least one carry to the South Col, before returning for a final summit attempt. As an indicator of just how daunting a task that really was, Pat Cullinan figured it would take one person a six-day round trip to get just one oxygen cylinder up to the South Col.¹⁰

At the head of the cwm, the route steepened as it began the ascent of the Lhotse Face and the surface changed from soft snow to hard, glassy ice. The lack of snow the previous winter coupled with high winds meant that the ice on the face was

⁹ P. Bayne, Interview.

¹⁰ Wilby, *Beyond the Icefall*, ch. 7.

unusually polished. The angle of the slope, too, made climbing difficult. It was not quite steep enough to make front-pointing convenient but was just a little too steep to allow a more ordinary walking style to be comfortable.

Camp three was established partway up the Lhotse Face, above 7400 m. As that camp began to be stocked, however, serious problems were becoming apparent. The expedition appeared to be losing momentum as the movement of supplies upward was slowing to a trickle and several attempts at pushing the route further fell well short of the South Col. It appeared as though the attempt had reached an impasse.

The problem was one familiar to those few other expeditions that had attempted Everest's South Col route without the aid of high-altitude porters. Attrition was beginning to take a toll as more and more climbers, exhausted by numerous carries through the icefall and up the Western Cwm, began to succumb to fatigue and various related ailments. It had been nearly two months since the ABEE team had arrived at base camp and most members had done 16–20 carries. It was a critical point in the expedition as further failures to reach the col could prove fatal to morale and the ABEE would prove yet again that Everest's South Col route could not be climbed without Sherpa support.

Sensing that something had to be done quickly to break the impasse, Peter Lambert set out from camp three for the col with an oxygen bottle on his back. The original plan had called for supplemental oxygen to be used only above the South Col, but Lambert knew he had to try something. The oxygen gave him the extra spurt of energy he needed and he struggled over the top of the Geneva Spur and onto the South Col. His account of the day's climb gives some indication of the intense physical effort needed to climb high on Everest, even with the help of supplemental oxygen.

I climbed across the snow slope to the yellow band. A short but steepish pitch at the start—a high rate of oxygen flow for that, then, once over the top, I moved up a short scabbly bit of snow on rock. The rock under the snow made the short pitch extremely uncomfortable. I traversed through the yellow band, then on a further rope length to the cache of Zac's Yaks [another of the sub-teams]. I was beginning to wonder whether the oxygen cylinder I was breathing from was worth carrying.

The snow on the next slope was about ankle deep, and I moved slowly across and up to the base of the Geneva Spur. I glanced up towards the summit of Lhotse every now and then, wondering how stable the slope was above me. Step slide, step slide, step slide—the movement of my feet and the Petzl jumar built up a rhythm. I counted my steps, aiming at taking forty steps before leaning over and resting on my ice-axe. At one of the anchors, I stopped for a while longer. The view down the Lhotse Face and right along the Western Cwm was spectacular. Above me the clouds were stringing out—blown off Everest and Lhotse by high winds. I had a drink; it didn't do me any good—I threw up on the spot...

It seemed to go on forever; the top seemed a long way away for the whole climb. I started to worry about time now: would I get to the Col with enough time to descend safely to Camp III? I decided, come what may, I would have to turn around at 3.30 p.m. I pulled myself up over the edge of the Geneva Spur. From there, I could see I would make it without any problems.

About a kilometre away, I could see the South Col. A couple of Sherpas [from the tri-nation expedition] were coming down the ropes and they said I had just one hour to go. It was an easy traverse around the spur and onto the Col. As I moved up, more and more of the Col came into view. It was a huge place, and as far as I could see, there were signs of past visits; tattered tents and oxygen cylinders everywhere.¹¹

The way was now open to camp four at about 8000 m—in striking distance of the summit. The next task was to set up and stock the South Col camp in preparation for one or more summit bids. Lambert's breakthrough seemed to breathe new life into the expedition and morale improved even further when the next day Chris Curry and Jim Truscott, climbing without supplemental oxygen, carried substantial loads to the col. In the end, 15 of the 18 climbers, most of them climbing without supplemental oxygen, carried loads to the South Col.

By the time the Australians were pushing their route up the Lhotse Face, the situation on the south side of Everest was complicated by the arrival of another expedition to attempt the South Col route. In the 1980s, this was a most unusual situation as the Nepalese authorities did not normally allow more than one expedition to attempt a particular route at the same time.¹² This other group, however, was no ordinary expedition.

The ABEE climbers were sharing their route with the massive tri-nation expedition—one of the largest expeditions ever to set foot on Everest. Bankrolled by Japanese support to the tune of A\$24 million, it consisted of 45 climbers in a total of 250 members from Nepal, China and Japan. It aimed to climb the mountain simultaneously from north and south, then telecast the victory celebrations live as climbers from all three nations met on the summit. With an extravaganza like that heavily supported by the Nepalese Government, the much smaller Australian expedition could easily have been booted off the mountain despite their prior booking of the route, as some rumours indicated might happen. Then Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, was, however, Patron-in-Chief of the ABEE and the Nepalese Government's support of the Australian attempt had been publicly acknowledged as part of Nepal's contribution to Australia's bicentenary celebrations. It would have thus been rather undiplomatic to pull the plug on the Australian expedition at the last minute. Even if it had, the ABEE still held the West Ridge permit (see Chapter 21).

¹¹ P. Lambert in *ibid.*, ch. 8.

¹² This was the policy of the Nepalese Government in 1988. It has since changed and more than one expedition is now allowed on a particular route at the same time.

In the event, relations between the two expeditions were most amicable, but each operated pretty much independently of the other. The tri-nation team arrived several weeks after the Australians, so found the icefall route already in place. In return for using the Australian icefall route, the tri-nation team agreed to maintain it for the duration of the expedition, although the ABEE climbers were never very happy with the standard of the maintenance and ended up doing much of the repair work themselves, especially Phil Pitham. In addition, the tri-nation climbers frequently failed to observe the ABEE's precaution that only one person at a time should be on the ladders, thus bringing the longer-term integrity of the ladders into question.

With their massive support and large number of high-altitude porters, the tri-nation team steamed up the mountain and overtook the struggling Australians partway up the Lhotse Face. Thus, when Lambert made the breakthrough to the South Col, he was following the route put in earlier by the tri-nation's lead climbers.

Right on schedule, on 5 May, the tri-nation team reached the summit of Mt Everest with three Chinese, two Nepalese and one Japanese climber celebrating on top in front of a television camera beaming the scene back to Japan. (Ironically, only a few seconds were shown as it clashed with a national baseball game in Japan.) Then, just as quickly as they had arrived, the tri-nation expedition descended the mountain and left the Australians to their own personal struggle of putting someone on the summit without the aid of high-altitude porters.

With a reasonable amount of supplies stocked on the South Col after some exhausting hauls to 8000 m, the stage was set for one of the most desperate struggles ever undertaken on Everest's South Ridge. After a first summit team, led by Mike Rheinberger, was stopped at camp three by high winds and then forced to retreat, a second team pushed its way to the South Col in preparation for its summit attempt. The group, Zac's Yaks, consisted of Zac Zaharias, Peter Lambert, Jim van Gelder and Bruce Farmer (see image 22.5).

The team's original purpose in pushing to the col was to 'render assistance' to three climbers—Steve Venables, Robert Anderson and Ed Webster—who had reportedly made the first ascent of Everest's Kangshung Face and were attempting to continue on, without the aid of supplemental oxygen, from the South Col to the summit. As it turned out, Venables did make the summit and the three were able to retreat without help. The Australian group, then, was in an ideal position to make a summit attempt of its own.

Arriving at the col on a windy afternoon in mid-May, they spent the next day settling in at camp four and scavenging as many full and partially full oxygen cylinders as they could find. The next night, at 1.30am on 16 May, the four climbers set out on what they hoped would be the culmination of years of training, planning and preparation: the successful ascent of Mt Everest by ABEE team members. On the

surface, it appeared that the foursome had an excellent chance of success. Lambert had proved his toughness with his initial push to the South Col and the other three had suffered less from fatigue and burn-out than many others on the expedition.

Even with eight full bottles of oxygen among the four of them and after a reasonably comfortable day's rest at camp four, they proved unable, however, to overcome the very difficult conditions high on the mountain. From the very start of the climb above the South Col, up snow gullies and slopes to the South Ridge itself, they found the going excruciatingly slow.

'I could tell we were going to have problems,' Peter Lambert recalled. 'The snow was much too heavy and our climbing rate too slow. It took us six hours to reach the trination camp four, which was only 300 vertical metres above the col.'¹³ They had run into a problem that plagues many parties climbing high on Himalayan peaks: deep, heavy snow that makes each step an energy-sapping exercise and quickly drains a climber's strength before the summit is in sight.

The four Australians struggled on, each one taking turns at the onerous task of plugging steps in the snow and, after more than 12 hours of brutal effort, they had just managed to reach the ridge at nearly 8600 m. It was a rough experience, as van Gelder recalled: 'My oxygen apparatus was barely working as the regulator was iced over. I ended up carrying a virtually full bottle of oxygen both up and down. To top it off, my toes were frostbitten as one of my socks had come off the foot.'¹⁴

By the time they reached the ridge, it had become painfully obvious to all four that they could not get to the summit and back down again that same day. If they continued, they would surely have to spend a night out high on Everest—and that was a risk that none of them wanted to take. They had to admit defeat and slowly return to the col while they had the time and energy to do so.

'We set off convinced we were going to climb the mountain,' van Gelder said. 'We soon found that, although we could have climbed the mountain, we didn't want to go to that extreme. I realised that if I continued to the summit, I could possibly have been "ga ga" for the rest of my life.'¹⁵ This first attempt was not without controversy, as discussed in the next chapter.

With the failure of this first attempt, morale began to drop. With each day gone, the monsoon was closer, and the increasingly fickle weather was a clear indication that it was not far away. Still, with a bit of luck, there would be time for one last shot at the top, even though it held little chance of success. The team next in turn up the mountain consisted of Paul Bayne and Pat Cullinan, who reached camp

13 P. Lambert, Interview.

14 J. van Gelder, Interview.

15 Ibid.

four on 19 May, which was their second time to the col (see image 22.6). A day later, another team, consisting of Mike Rheinberger, Chris Curry, Terry McCullagh and James Strohfeldt, arrived on the col. This team, Dad's Army, had changed considerably in composition. Jon Muir was recovering from an attack of worms, Curry had replaced Truscott and Pitham was injured. In addition, McCullagh was unwell and intended to do only a supporting carry to the South Col. This team was the one that was supposed to have been in position for the next (and almost certainly last) summit attempt. Bayne and Cullinan had missed a critical base camp conference after Zac's Yaks summit attempt and did not know they were to have given way to Rheinberger's group.

As it turned out, it did not matter who was meant to be making the summit attempt as the weather deteriorated and no-one was able to climb. It was typical late-May weather on the South Col. The place was blasted with gale-force winds and it was bitterly cold. There was nothing to do but sit it out in the tents and hope for a break in the weather long enough to allow one last push for the top.

Every day confined to the tents, however, meant further deterioration in the physical condition of the climbers. They had already done an enormous amount of load carrying at very high altitudes—much more than the usual Everest climber would have done. Furthermore, even the use of small amounts of oxygen while resting or sleeping could not arrest the rapid deterioration that occurred at or above 8000 m. Every day spent waiting would make it that much harder to climb the mountain or to descend in bad weather if that option was forced on them.

Cullinan described what it was like to hang on in a tent at 8000 m waiting for the weather to clear:

Your whole body is slowing down. You're in a 'stunned mullet' state. Your faculties just aren't working as well as they should. You want to put a boot on, and you hold it at the bottom of your foot. Time passes—maybe 10 minutes. Then your mate asks you whether you're taking the boot off or putting it on, and you don't know.¹⁶

As the days of bad weather wore on, the situation began to look very grim indeed. In the backs of the climbers' minds was the horrific Indian tragedy on the South Col in 1985. In that incident, four of India's best mountaineers perished from exhaustion under very similar circumstances to those the Australians were experiencing. The Indians had been trapped on the col by a storm for four days, exhausted their oxygen and other supplies and succumbed just before the weather cleared and a rescue party could reach the col. The Indians made repeated attempts to get to the start of the fixed ropes at the top of the Lhotse Face but could not find it in the storm. Cullinan wanted to make sure the Australians did not meet a similar fate so he took a compass bearing from the tents to the top of the ropes.

16 P. Cullinan, Interview.

As the tent-bound days dragged on, the climbers began to reassess their situation. First, Strohfeltd and Curry decided not to push their luck and went down and, when the weather still showed no signs of abating, Rheinberger descended as well, after four days on the col. His retreat was not made without considerable personal agony.

Bayne, too, had thoughts of retreat but he and Cullinan decided to stick it out longer on the col. Cullinan said:

The sensible thing to do was to move down to Camp II, yet this would be our only chance to get a summit attempt. But we were exhausted just getting to the Col. Our deterioration rate was phenomenal. We would almost feel ourselves deteriorating by the hour. It was cold, windy, noisy and uncomfortable; we got very little sleep.

We virtually ran out of food by Day Three and had to search the South Col during a break in the weather for some. We finally found some Chinese noodles.

During our time on the Col, we spent much time in finalizing our plans. During that time I kept a daily account of exactly how many drinks Paul and I had had. If I had had 10 and he eight, it was time to get another two into him. Dehydration being the problem it is at high altitude, it was essential we got liquids down.

South Col: a reluctant retreat

Michael Rheinberger

With Terry [McCullagh] on his way down, James Strohfeltd and I soberly considered the team's and our own chances of gaining the summit. Outside the wind howled, temperatures hovered around -25 to -35°C and the weather forecasts were pessimistic. I was determined that I should not leave the mountain until I had given my best. James, too, wanted a go at the summit but for him, participation and doing his best for the team seemed to be sufficient. I was in a personal dilemma. I knew that in good health, Chris, Paul and even James had been faster through the camps than I. However, I had been a consistent performer, without sickness, and much faster than Pat. I believed the best chance of a team success would be gained by establishing a camp five at around 8350–8400 m, or by using a Japanese camp five, if its tent was serviceable. Although the tent was visible from the col, no-one really knew if it had collapsed. Clearly, team success was more likely if two climbers were selected as the lead pair and the others moved in support, helping to break trail and carrying support oxygen.

In the solitude of our tent, James and I stewed over the situation until James won the upper hand and I agreed that we would support Chris and Paul in an initial summit bid the following day, provided the weather improved beyond the horrendous 50–60-knot winds which blasted the col. We called Chris to the tent and conveyed the plan, although he indicated that he would stay for only one further day, being well aware of overall deterioration at that altitude.

We called Pat to the tent and outlined the plan. Pat was aghast and argued vehemently that payment of \$5000 should guarantee a shot at the summit. There followed a bitter scene between him and me, as I had been placed in control of all personnel on the col. Invective flew on invective, fuelled by anger and frustration. Finally in disgust, I told Pat to exercise his own judgment and the meeting broke up in a bitter mood.

Outside, the wind howled and the evening radio schedule predicted continuing poor conditions. Later Pat returned to our tent, apologising for his outburst and promising to help in the carries. As it happened, the wind never abated and in the morning Chris and James decided to descend. Pat and Paul, who had already been on the col for a day longer than the others, decided to stay, now joined by me only. Pat had been keeping a record of everything he and Paul were drinking and eating, in order to stay on top of the dehydration problem and felt confident they could hang on a few days longer.

The 23rd [May] came and went. Chris and James descended. Personal differences temporarily buried, the remaining three prepared ourselves to begin a summit push on that evening if only the weather would relent. However, by 10pm, the wind still roared and to have set out would have been utterly foolhardy.

In my tent I dozed the night away. I had resolved to descend on the 24th unless the weather improved, rest up at base camp and return again to the fray. The 24th dawned as gusty and violent as before and I descended, fighting a bitter internal war. Had I capitulated or had I exercised sound judgment?

Pat and Paul stayed. The winds had not eased since they arrived on the col, but their faith remained as unshakeable as the mighty Mother Goddess herself.

We were both pretty weak. I had been coughing up a lot of dried blood and puss. I coughed it up into a plastic bag under the strange idea that I'd show it to a doctor at Base Camp, and he'd prescribe the right medicine for me. I showed it to Paul. He was disgusted!¹⁷

Even though they knew they were deteriorating rapidly, Bayne and Cullinan, despite the fact that they had arrived a day earlier than the others, were determined to hang on for as long as they could. The mood at base camp was becoming extremely tense as the pair was into their sixth day on the South Col. They were still alive, but no non-Sherpa had survived that long on the col before. Would they have enough strength to escape and get off the mountain when the weather cleared?

As leader, Brookes was extraordinarily concerned for the pair and had stationed a support team at camp two in addition to organising other climbers to head up from base camp if they were needed to effect a rescue. Rheinberger and McCullagh stopped at camp two on their descent from the South Col and were joined by Brian Agnew, who had ascended from base camp, to form the support team should Cullinan and Bayne need help returning from the col. Near the end of the sixth day, the weather showed signs of improving and radio contact was made with the climbers on the col.

The relief at base camp when they learned that Bayne and Cullinan were able to move under their own steam quickly turned into surprise and then even greater anxiety when the pair announced that they were not coming down but going up! To have stayed on the col for six days was risky enough, but, in the view of many at base camp, to then go for the summit of Everest was foolhardy and dangerous in the extreme. It was certainly inviting a disaster to happen.

'It was a very emotional time for everyone,' Brian Agnew recalled. 'We thought they'd expire up there. We were all exhausted, physically drained. All of the promises of success were fading, and then to have fatalities... Those of us remaining were in the depths of despair.'¹⁸

¹⁷ P. Cullinan, Personal communication.

¹⁸ B. Agnew, Interview.

Back up on the col, Bayne and Cullinan slowly readied themselves to climb and left their tent at 10pm on 24 May 1988 to go to the top of Mt Everest. It is usual for many climbers to return from an Everest ascent in a totally exhausted state, but very few set out for the top in a state near to total exhaustion. Bayne's account of the summit day—a drama of amazing determination, of utter relief at reaching the top and of wild hallucinations and virtual sleepwalking on the descent—is testament to the strength he was able to summon to keep going.

Summit day on Mt Everest

Paul Bayne

Pat and I left the tents on the South Col about 10pm. As we set out across the flats toward the bottom of the face, Pat remarked on how slowly I was walking and how bad I looked. I felt at the limit of exhaustion just walking on flat terrain.

We climbed slowly together up the ice gullies toward the South Ridge. No matter how exhausted I felt, I was always able to dredge up some more energy from somewhere.

We reached the South Ridge and left the shelter of the gullies below. A light breeze was blowing and I felt chilled.

Soon we were forced onto the Kangshung side of the ridge into horror snow conditions. It was bottomless, and I sank in up to my chest. I had to punch my arms in up to my shoulders to make sure I didn't slip away. Under those conditions it was every man for himself. We were concentrating so hard on the climbing that we just drifted apart.

Above the Hillary Step the angle eased off considerably and the summit was very near. Yet I still wasn't sure that I would make it. I felt very much at my limit.

I had stopped carrying my ice axe above the Step, and had slung it over my pack. I needed my hands to support my knees as I felt that I would collapse at any time. Even 20 feet from the top I still didn't know I would make it. It would have been no surprise had my legs buckled beneath me.

I'm not sure when I actually reached the top. My memories of the summit day are a combination of moments of exceptional clarity and vague blurs. But it was some time in the early afternoon, and I instantly collapsed onto the snow. I didn't even open my eyes for 15 or 20 minutes.

When I did open them, I slowly turned around on my stomach about 5 or 10 degrees at a time, until I had seen the 360-degree panorama.

The weather had been improving as we climbed. At first the big peaks like Everest and Makalu were in and out of hogsbacks, but the clouds gradually dissipated as the day wore on. When I reached the summit, there was no high cloud at all. Lower cloud had built up in Nepal to 24 000 ft [7300 m]. All of the big peaks were glistening above in the brilliant sun.

When I looked down the South Ridge, I could see Pat, coming up slowly, just below the Hillary Step. It is the only place on the ridge where you can actually see the summit.

Pat was climbing near the edge of a great, overhanging cornice, and I was very concerned for his safety. Pat later told me that he could see me standing rather toward the edge of Everest's summit cornice, and he was worried about me!

I must have been on the summit for about 45 minutes or an hour before I started down. I passed Pat just above the Hillary Step. That was undoubtedly one of the biggest thrills of the entire expedition. I knew then that he was going to make it. It gave me a very good, warm feeling.

We had a very short, stunted conversation and then continued on. Even though Pat was only 50 metres or so from the summit, he was two hours behind me.

The descent was an amazing experience. I knew that it would be a very interesting game to see if I could get down.

I knew that I had to concentrate on my crampon placements but it was impossible. My mind kept drifting and I began to hallucinate wildly.

Little metallic figures were racing around me on the ridge, and strange clouds were swirling around chaotically above my head. Suddenly I would realise that I had been looking up at the clouds while I was walking along a very narrow ridge with steep drop-offs on both sides. Then my concentration would snap back to my crampons for a few moments before more little metallic figures began dancing along the ridge.

I got back to the South Col at dusk and grabbed the radio to let the others know that we had succeeded. Before I made the call, I looked up to check Pat's position and was horrified to see that he was still at the South Summit.

I decided not to make a radio call then, as Pat's position would undoubtedly have caused great concern. In fact, I wasn't certain then that Pat would survive the descent.

He arrived at the Col sometime during the night, after I had crashed. It was the next morning, then, that I radioed the others to tell them we had made it and were now safe.

Cullinan's performance was, if anything, even more dogged and determined:

When I was on the South Col that night getting ready to go for it I knew that the next 24 hours would be the most traumatic of my life. It's a bit like being in the Olympic Games and going for a Gold Medal—you can't do a rerun. You have to make everything of the one chance you've got. Even though we felt exhausted just moving across the flat ground on the col, we knew we had to just keep going. It was mind over body. There was no other way. We had come to climb Everest and we would. It was as simple as that.

We later learned what dangerous physical condition we were in. Five days after the climb my blood was measured to be over six times thicker than normal! The doctors estimated that during the ascent our blood must have been about eight times thicker! We were certainly prime material for strokes and heart attacks.

The climbing was very exciting along the South-East Ridge, very narrow in parts with big drops on either side—9000 ft [2700 m] into Nepal and 12 000 ft [3700 m] into Tibet. At times I was forced by big cornices onto rock on the Nepalese side. It was very tricky climbing in parts. I could feel my crampons scratching around on the rock for a grip. And I had to climb along this ridge in a very bad state; I felt worse than a drunk driving home at night.¹⁹

Cullinan reached the summit of Mt Everest at 2.15pm on 25 May, about two hours after Bayne had made the top. The two met briefly about 50 m from the summit, with Bayne on the way down and Cullinan still struggling to get to the top of the world.

Cullinan said:

When I got to the summit, I took off the oxygen bottle and put it down. It was probably the worst feeling I had on the whole expedition. After a few minutes a tremendous claustrophobic feeling swept over me. I thought I'd die. I put the bottle on again. I put a sticker with the Australian flag and the words 'Have a Go Australia'

¹⁹ P. Cullinan, Interview.

on the summit, along with a Comalco sticker [for Bruce Farmer]. I was too worn out to pull out the bigger Australian and 1 Commando Regiment flags. I was in a bad way. Finally, I took a few photos and headed down quickly.

I ran out of oxygen just after the Hillary Step, and then started hallucinating. Fortunately, I picked up a partially full bottle at the tri-nation camp five and used it down to the South Col, where it ran out. I didn't get more oxygen until the next day. Paul had set up a bottle in my tent but I was in such a bad way that I couldn't get it going.²⁰

It was nearly midnight when Cullinan finally arrived back at the col; he had been climbing for more than 24 hours. Until Cullinan's safe return, Bayne decided not to radio down to base camp to avoid raising fears about Cullinan's position. The fact that there had been no radio contact for more than 24 hours after the pair had set out caused worry enough at base camp. It took little imagination to guess the most likely reason for the lack of radio contact, particularly since the climbers had set out on their summit attempt after having spent a record-breaking six days pinned down on the South Col.

On the morning of 26 May, Chris Curry, Jon Muir, James Strohfeldt and Zac Zaharias were dispatched to steam up the mountain as fast as they could to see if Cullinan and Bayne were still alive and to render assistance if needed. Their first task was to relieve Brian Agnew, Terry McCullagh and Mike Rheinberger, who were still in camp two in support, and then await a radio call from camp four before proceeding further. When they learned that Cullinan and Bayne were not only safe but had both reached the summit of Everest, they would have jumped for joy had they the strength to do so at that altitude. Their services would, however, still very likely be required as the radio reports indicated that Cullinan was in a bad way and would probably need help to descend from the South Col.

Feeling strong and fit, Curry and Muir powered up all the way from camp two to the South Col the next day while Strohfeldt and Zaharias returned to base camp. Much to their relief and delight, Cullinan was somehow able to pluck a bit more energy out of his extraordinary store and move down the mountain on his own. With the two fresh climbers installed in camp four, the fine weather holding out and some oxygen still left, the rescue was instantly turned into another summit bid.

Muir described his experience:

A wild night greeted us as we stumbled out of the tents just after midnight. Strong winds gusted across the Col and bands of dark cloud raced by. It looked terrible, but we set off nevertheless. Deep in my heart, the little person who guides me through the most difficult times, who I suspect can glimpse the future, whispered that this was my day...

²⁰ Ibid.

Thigh-deep snow led to the South Summit, 200 metres above. Energy from outside my body surged through my entire being, and steadily I ploughed on up. We had left Base Camp 48 hours earlier and yet I felt stronger than ever.

The wind, my great foe, plucked at me as I literally crawled out of the last of the deep snow and on to the South Summit. The wind blew a massive plume off the final ridge, gusting hard every few minutes, trying to entice me on a brief tour of Tibet.

I shot some film and checked the oxygen; heaps left. I turned it up full blast and charged off. Now on perfect snow and carrying just one cylinder, I could really move. Despite the wind, it was pure joy to be up there alone...

Lhotse was now well below and Nuptse, which had towered over me for so many months, looked tiny. A grin spread from ear to ear as I slowly realized that now nothing would stop me.

Feeling more like a spaceman on a distant world than a mountaineer, I moved rapidly up the final slopes. The world fell away in all directions. A thousand thoughts and emotions crashed over me. For an hour I stood alone with an overwhelming sensation of isolation and insignificance.²¹

Muir's feat was nearly duplicated by Curry, who narrowly missed reaching the summit when the regulator on his non-Australian oxygen cylinder malfunctioned. After climbing to 8700 m and seeming certain to become the fourth ABEE member to stand on the summit of Everest, he was forced to descend. Curry's performance was, however, particularly impressive since he had been on the South Col when Bayne and Cullinan began their long vigil. To have descended all the way to base camp and then to climb quickly back up, nearly to the top, showed remarkable strength and determination. In fact, Curry climbed to the South Col three times—the only member of the expedition to do so.

The expedition faced one last hurdle in getting everyone safely off the mountain. Agnew had accompanied Cullinan and Bayne through the icefall and down to base camp, leaving McCullagh and Rheinberger at camp two in support. The pair had spent 10 days at camp two and was much in need of relief. Brookes, however, could not convince any of the remaining climbers to take over the support role at camp two. Indeed, several climbers had already departed base camp for Kathmandu. Worse yet, the icefall route was not being maintained.

When Muir and Curry reached camp two and joined McCullagh and Rheinberger for the last trip down the mountain, there had been no maintenance on the icefall route for 14 days. The route had deteriorated considerably and become exceedingly dangerous, as McCullagh recalled:

21 Muir, 'To the roof of the world'.

The descent was horrendous. With the approaching warmer summer weather, ladders had collapsed, fixed ropes had been destroyed, and seracs had obliterated tracks. It was a painstaking and dangerous descent off the mountain for the final four climbers, who were already very tired. It was some of the most difficult climbing that I have ever experienced.²²

Somehow the four descended the treacherous icefall safely, bringing the ABEE to a successful conclusion. The three ascents had been a remarkable finale to an expedition that at one point seemed on the verge of collapse. Indeed, the line between exhilarating success and tragic failure for the ABEE was extremely thin. Just as finely balanced, however, were many other aspects of the ABEE—the most complex and fascinating Australian expedition ever to venture into the Himalaya.

22 T. McCullagh, Personal communication.

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.