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ABEE: an analysis

There is no doubt that the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) was a remarkable achievement. Yet, in the aftermath of the climb, it received very little attention, even in the Australian press. In the international mountaineering literature, it was virtually ignored. Much of the reason for the lack of recognition, at least in Australia, was that it was not the first Australian ascent of the world's highest mountain. That honour belonged to Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer. Unfortunately, in our society, we put much emphasis on being first; being the second or third to do something receives little reward, even though the achievement might be just as outstanding in other ways.

The ABEE was the largest and most complex expedition to the Himalaya from the Antipodes and, partly as a result, it was undoubtedly the most conflict ridden. No analysis of the ABEE can ignore the role of conflict in the conduct of the expedition. It is a theme that is treated at great length in Sorrel Wilby's account of the ABEE, *Beyond the Icefall*. Indeed, her exhaustive expose of the conflict aspect of the trip seems to overshadow any analysis of the enormity of the team's achievement. As veteran New Zealand climber Colin Monteath noted in his review of *Beyond the Icefall*, it was 'a big expedition with a lot of fragile egos—amazing it didn't fly apart'.¹

So why didn't it fly apart? What was the nature of the conflict? How serious was it? How did it affect the expedition?

Wilby's account makes absorbing reading. It provides insight into the inner workings of a large Everest expedition and, according to many of the ABEE members, is a very faithful record of what the trip was really like. Written from the perspective of

¹ Monteath, C. 1990, "Beyond the Icefall." Himalaya. Alpine book roundup', *New Zealand Alpine Club Bulletin*, June/July, p. 58.

a non-climber, it exudes fascination for the number and intensity of the outbursts, arguments, wrangles, confrontations and acrimonious meetings that seemed to be a continual part of the trip. To understand the nature of the divisiveness that plagued the ABEE, however, it is necessary to examine its origins and dynamics and then put it in perspective with the overall achievements of the expedition.

It is often said that, particularly for large expeditions, there is not one expedition but many, depending on the perceptions of the individual climbers. This was undoubtedly true for the ABEE, especially when examining the role of conflict in the expedition. Many climbers were virtually oblivious to the problems and claimed that accounts of conflict and divisiveness within the ABEE were vastly overstated. Others, however, were deeply affected by the acrimony, carrying scars for months or years later. The first part of this chapter examines in some detail the perceptions of those climbers most embroiled in the conflict and attempts to present each of their individual points of view. Such an account can never be complete, but hopefully it will shed at least some light on the nature of the problems that, years later, still arouse intense feelings in some ABEE members.

The conflict can be analysed at three levels. The first—often categorised as ‘personality conflict’—is common to all large Himalayan expeditions (and some smaller ones). Its origins are easy to understand. Climbers in the high Himalaya are under considerable stress. They are highly motivated to achieve a very single-minded objective—getting to the top of the mountain—yet at the same time are operating in conditions of hardship: cold and uncomfortable living arrangements, monotonous and increasingly unpalatable food (it is only a slight exaggeration to say that a climber’s performance in the Himalaya is strongly correlated with his ability to ingest expedition food) and the ever-present tension that results from working and living in a very dangerous arena. In conditions such as these, very small personality traits that would go unnoticed in everyday life at sea level can assume major importance on a Himalayan expedition. As Bill Packard, the very experienced New Zealand mountaineer who was the advisor to the ANU Mountaineering Club’s 1978 expedition to Dunagiri, once noted: ‘Up in the Himalaya very little things can trigger intense conflict—like the colour of a man’s socks, not to mention the smell.’² On the ABEE, there was plenty of scope for that type of conflict.

The second level of conflict is one that invariably appears on large Everest expeditions, although it often occurs on other very large Himalayan mountains. It is related to the fact that climbers have a very intense desire to succeed. On large expeditions to big mountains, only a few people reach the summit, often as the result of very hard work put in by the rest of the team. That can create frustrated people who believe they are not getting a fair go for their own personal summit aspirations. This level of conflict is often manifested in charges that the leader has already picked a summit

2 B. Packard, Interview.

team or that some people are not doing enough in the early stages of the expedition so they can save themselves for a summit attempt. This is a classic problem on large Everest expeditions and is certainly one that contributed to the ABEE's problems.

Brian Agnew summed it up very well: 'The ambitions of individual climbers on Everest are unbelievable. That's what drove most people. The niceties of other expeditions are put aside. Ruthless ambition came to the fore.'³ The results of that ambition led to some classic behaviour on the ABEE, particularly among the civilian climbers. Jim van Gelder noted that there were 'some Machiavellian characters amongst the civilians, [there were] a few very destructive forces there'.⁴ Peter Lambert added that 'some of the civilians were quite selfish in trying to achieve their aims'.⁵ At least one ABEE member—a civilian—was accused of hiding an oxygen cylinder on the South Col after a load carry to improve his chances later. Others noted that some military climbers could be accused of similar sins, although in general the military climbers were strongly grounded in the ethos of teamwork and trust.

Paul Bayne, one of the three to reach the summit, expressed the common feeling that one was not being given a chance for the summit:

One of the low points of the expedition for me was the jockeying for positions for a summit attempt. When everyone is spread out on the mountain, it is easy to feel you're not getting a fair go. You can easily feel that you've been put on a 'load-carrying team', and that you wouldn't get a fair chance for the summit. If you think you're getting a raw deal, it's hard not to be frustrated.⁶

These first two levels of conflict represent totally normal behaviour for highly motivated mountaineers on a big, dangerous peak such as Everest. The third level of conflict, however, was based on the deep-seated, philosophical differences that had led to the serious split in the Army Alpine Association (AAA) team in the lead-up to the expedition (see Chapter 21). The three levels of conflict, of course, did not operate independently but were intertwined, often in the same argument or confrontation, to create some nasty incidents. It is really the third level of conflict, however, fuelled by liberal doses of the first two, that has the potential to blow a big expedition such as the ABEE apart and cause its failure.

As described in the development of the 1978 Dunagiri expedition, the confused roles of Peter Cocker, the official leader of the expedition, and Ken Baldwin, the prime organiser and *de facto* leader in the final months before the climb itself, created a situation that could have led to this deep level of conflict on the expedition. Their roles, however, were clarified just before the expedition left Australia and it

³ B. Agnew, Interview.

⁴ J. van Gelder, Interview.

⁵ P. Lambert, Interview.

⁶ P. Bayne, Interview.

was conducted in a generally harmonious way. Unfortunately for the ABEE, the philosophical split that rent the AAA was carried over to the expedition itself and seriously harmed its conduct.

Again on the mountain, severe problems flared between those, such as Jim Truscott and Terry McCullagh, who believed that a well-organised military-style approach based on teamwork and trust offered the best chance of success and those, such as Zac Zaharias and Peter Lambert, who thought that a more civilian-style approach was appropriate. The former argued for a more military-style expedition, with a hierarchical structure and a clearly defined but flexible plan of action that required careful coordination and communication. They firmly believed that this was the best way to tackle the South Col route on Everest with such a large team and would give the best chance of success. The difference of opinion was often couched in terms of an individualistic or egalitarian approach (civilian) versus a more team-oriented approach (military).

Truscott, however, maintained that the divisiveness was across the board and had little to do with the split in the AAA or with a military versus civilian grouping. He traced the root of the conflict to the fact that many people would support a plan that would benefit them personally and that would give them the best chance to get to the top. Others wanted an approach that would get someone, not necessarily them individually, to the top. Others floated between the two groups. Thus, in Truscott's view, the causes of the intense conflicts were also related to that classic Everest problem of climbers believing they were not getting a fair go at the summit. In an atmosphere of apparent egalitarianism, some climbers' ambitions would be sacrificed to get others to the top without a clear and mutually agreed plan to do so.

Truscott said:

The first week of the expedition at Base Camp was the philosophical crux of the climb. It was at this stage that the leader announced how the mountain was to be climbed and it was a significant departure from the conventional approach to climbing Himalayan mountains. Instead of getting sufficient supplies to the highest camp to support an initial summit party of the two to four most likely climbers to succeed, it was announced that additional supplies would be carried up to allow each of the four groups as equal a chance as possible in getting to the top. It was a very egalitarian plan but as always, would be subject to the vagaries of luck, weather and attrition in the team. The plan was hardly questioned at the time as everyone was more concerned with the prospect of establishing a route through the Icefall without the use of Sherpas. Those who did think it through knew that no matter what plan was implemented, conventional or egalitarian, performance at altitude is the unknown variable. In hindsight the egalitarian plan prevented team cohesion right from the start. It fostered separation of four groups and prevented the coalescence of individual, group and team goals.⁷

⁷ Truscott, J. 1989, 'A lesson in high altitude expedition leadership', *AAA Newsletter*, no. 4/89.

Interestingly, Paul Bayne also criticised the splitting of the team into four distinct groups, but from a practical point of view:

The idea of having sub-teams was a bit crazy. The days I felt good were rest days and the days we worked I felt awful. You just couldn't jump in when you felt strong. Teams couldn't be mixed and matched depending on how people felt—the system was not flexible enough.⁸

Brian Agnew suggested that three teams of six might have been better, allowing individuals to rest at their own rates within a team.

Austin Brookes, from his perspective as leader, maintained that the creation of smaller groups was the most sensible approach and that problems arose because it worked too well:

[I]t was patently obvious that (i) there was an abundance of talented people each with their own leadership skills. They had to be given more responsibility than just satisfying their own personal climbing ambition, and (ii) communication and leadership would best be exercised by coordinating the efforts of several small groups rather than attempting to orchestrate the efforts of a large group of talented and experienced climbers.

I was convinced that the splitting of the expedition into several smaller teams was the sensible way to handle the initial build-up. Each leader of these smaller teams acted very responsibly in choosing his own team. They based their choice on their knowledge and experience of the climbers, a desire to be fair and to consider the best interests of the expedition. They saved me from having to make some very tough decisions that I had anticipated would be necessary. There was no attempt to select either their own personal friends or the strongest climbers.

I was also convinced that later attrition would force us to change teams and work on the basis of a summit team (or two) and support climbers. At various stages in the later part of the expedition I put this point of view as an alternative. Basically the original strategy had worked too well. The teams had established an identity and spirit which made them loath to change.⁹

Those who supported a civilian-style approach to the expedition had a much different perspective on the nature of the deep-seated differences between the two AAA groups that incited such frequent and acrimonious incidents. They argued that it had much less to do with an individual versus team-based approach, or the break-up of the large team into subunits, than with the opposition of part of the AAA contingent to a more consensus or collaborative style of operation.

⁸ P. Bayne, Interview.

⁹ A. Brookes, Personal communication.

Lambert said:

I had the feeling throughout the expedition that some people in the army expected to be told everything. They wanted to know where to put the next foot. Without that, they felt somewhat threatened. That's perhaps an indictment against the way we train our people. They are told everything; there are orders. Austin's style is very different: 'I think this would be a good idea. What do you think?' Some of the officers expected orders like they would give to their soldiers. So when they weren't told exactly what they were to do, they felt a bit uncomfortable.¹⁰

Mike Rheinberger expressed that point of view more forcefully:

Certain AAA members still believed the whole thing was a military expedition, and they looked for a style of leadership that's more relevant to certain military situations. They looked for orders. It became absurd. Early on, some AAA members wanted to know the precise day we were going to leave the mountain. It showed a real lack of appreciation of what we were trying to do.

We had a very dynamic situation. It called for judgment and flexibility. Some people on the trip showed remarkable inflexibility. It was allied with quite outrageous behaviour directed against certain perceived inadequacies in the food, and in the Sherpas' preparation of the food.¹¹

Terry McCullagh, on the other hand, strongly disagreed with Rheinberger's assessment of the military climbers: 'A military style [of climbing] does not mean orders which must be blindly followed. Nothing could be further from the truth. I do not think this point was well understood by the civilian members of the team.'¹²

He also noted the significant weaknesses that could arise from a more *laissez-faire* style of leadership:

The magnitude of the task demanded complex planning, sound coordination, excellent communications, positive leadership and a good dose of determination. We needed to ensure that the right people and supplies were in the right location at the right time...People's independence and personal desires should have been subordinate to the requirements of the overall plan.¹³

An example of the weaknesses of a *laissez-faire* style of leadership was the lack of discipline near the end of the expedition, when Rheinberger, McCullagh, Muir and Curry were forced to descend a very dangerous Khumbu Icefall route that had not been maintained for a fortnight.

10 P. Lambert, Interview.

11 M. Rheinberger, Interview.

12 T. McCullagh, Correspondence.

13 Ibid.

Rick Moor, not one of the principals embroiled in the conflict, offered another perspective: ‘Most members of the expedition, both military and civilian, were bemused by rather than involved in the infighting within the AAA between those supporting a more individual approach and those [who] supported the team-based option.’¹⁴

Nevertheless, Moor had clear ideas on the origins of the infighting:

Some of the military members were antagonistic towards Zaharias and Lambert because they felt that they had been betrayed by them when the team was initially selected—that is, when several fully paid and qualified military members were initially excluded from the team. It was believed that Zaharias and Lambert had been disloyal to the AAA [see Chapter 21]. It was felt that they were placing individual ambition before group loyalty. [Individual ambition being to ensure that they were members of the team and group loyalty being their assumed obligations to AAA members.] It is quite possible that they were not disloyal to the AAA members in question; however, at no stage did they explain their actions. Therefore, the perception remained.¹⁵

Lack of communication between the AAA West Ridge group (essentially those who accused Zaharias and Lambert of disloyalty) and Zaharias and Lambert certainly accentuated the original problem. To accuse Zaharias and Lambert of not explaining their actions appears, however, to be unfair. On several occasions, Lambert wrote to Truscott asking that they get together informally and discuss developments in the ABEE. These were genuine attempts by Lambert to clear the air and improve relationships among the AAA climbers. Lambert received replies to none of the letters.

In general, however, two-way communication problems between the ABEE board and the AAA were undoubtedly a significant contributing factor to the conflict. There was deep-seated concern among several AAA members that they were not consulted on critical issues that affected them and that they were informed of board decisions without any attempt to seek their views on those decisions.

On the other hand, some critical AAA committee meetings were held when the three AAA members on the ABEE board—Zaharias, Lambert and Cullinan—were not present. The minutes from these meetings sometimes contained directives on the conduct of the ABEE for the three to implement. When, as Zaharias noted, the directives were ‘often totally impractical or expensive’¹⁶ and were thus not implemented by the ABEE board, he and his AAA colleagues on the board copped the bitter complaints that came from some of the AAA climbers.

¹⁴ R. Moor, Personal communication.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Z. Zaharias, Correspondence.

Another problem that often beset Himalayan expeditions probably exacerbated the conflict. Food, or rather the lack of quality or quantity thereof, is often a problem. Rheinberger's comments indicated that it also became a bone of contention within the ABEE. As to the nature of the 'perceived inadequacies', as Rheinberger put it, Moor suggested that 'it wasn't so much that the food was bland or inadequate, it was that there was no reason for it to be so'.¹⁷ Unfortunately, Zaharias was the expedition's rations officer and copped some heavy criticism from those dissatisfied with the food.

Judgment of the quality of expedition food is a very relative thing. Four members of the 1988 Australian Baruntse expedition visited the ABEE base camp near the end of the expedition. They sampled the base camp food and the high-altitude rations and declared them 'superb' compared with the fare they had suffered through on Baruntse!

Given these various perspectives, how serious was this third level of conflict? The first two levels of conflict almost always disappear after an expedition is over and have no lasting effects, but not so for the third. Although some ABEE team members were able to pretty much isolate themselves from the disputes or simply let the conflict wash over them without much effect, it was clear that others were deeply troubled by what happened on the mountain.

'I can't really say at the end of the expedition that I enjoyed it,' Lambert said. 'There was much more physical and psychological stress than enjoyment. The psychological stress saps you as much or more than the physical stress.'¹⁸

During the expedition, Zaharias suffered far more criticism from some of the military climbers than did Lambert or Cullinan—the other two AAA members of the ABEE board. Some of the hostility was intensely personal, Zaharias recalled: 'Many of the criticisms were levelled in a most hurtful and insensitive manner to whomever was the target, and they were mostly towards me.'¹⁹

Rheinberger was particularly upset by the whole experience:

I feel very sorry that there still seems to linger some ill will between some members of the expedition...I wish a lot of it could just be forgotten. It's not doing people's reputations or friendships much good at all.

A lot of us came away extremely depressed and disappointed by events on the mountain. I personally had a very rotten time for at least three months afterwards. I literally went bush when I came home. After having put in all that effort for so many years, to see certain things happen.²⁰

17 R. Moor, Personal communication.

18 P. Lambert, Interview.

19 Z. Zaharias, Correspondence.

20 M. Rheinberger, Interview.

Finally, in a succinct and penetrating fashion, Phil Pitham summed up the conflict aspect of the trip: ‘We all got back safely, but we didn’t leave the mountain as mates.’²¹

To put the entire conflict issue into perspective, however, it is very important to remember that, in the final analysis, the ABEE was a magnificent success. Despite the severity of the conflicts, when the going really got tough, even by Himalayan standards, the ABEE was able to snatch a most remarkable victory from a situation that looked almost beyond recovery. The expedition did not blow apart due to internal pressures, as many other large Himalayan expeditions had.

Much to their credit, the antagonists within the AAA ultimately put the ABEE’s overall goal above their differences and put everything they had into the success of the expedition. The genuine joy that all of the ABEE team experienced with the last-minute success was a real highlight of the trip for Bayne: ‘When we came down, the main antagonists were genuinely pleased that we had succeeded. They were very enthusiastic and happy for us. It wiped out a lot of the bad feelings earlier on in the expedition.’²²

Austin Brookes, who as leader copped many of the criticisms and attacks that resulted from the conflicts within the AAA, was nevertheless very impressed with the ability of the AAA climbers to perform as a team:

Despite the differences within the military group, they continued to work together and overall the military climber lasted the pace better than some of the civilians. The civilians had the more accomplished and experienced climbers but the attitude of the military climber was exemplified by Pat Cullinan. I developed a healthy respect for the determination of Pat in particular, and of the military climber in general.²³

If the perceived lack of flexibility among some AAA members revealed a deficiency in the way the army trained its people, perhaps the ability of the military climbers to overcome intense personal differences for the good of the team and their ability to see out a task to its conclusion no matter how arduous and frustrating pointed to strengths in army training methods.

Before evaluating the significance of the ABEE’s achievement, one very important individual contribution—not as glamorous or as publicly visible as the efforts of those who reached the summit or of those who worked so tirelessly on the mountain in support—should be recognised. Peter Allen never set foot on Everest in 1988, yet he played an essential part in the success of the ABEE. He brought a considerable amount of expertise and experience to the planning of the ABEE from the very start and he matched his knowledge with tireless effort to ensure that the ABEE was in the best possible organisational state when it reached the mountain. It is no secret

21 P. Pitham, Interview.

22 P. Bayne, Interview.

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

that good organisation is an indispensable ingredient in the success of a Himalayan expedition. Some members thought it a considerable injustice when Allen was overlooked in the awarding of Orders of Australia to some members following the success of the ABEE.

Allen was one of the most skilled and experienced of the civilian climbers, but he opted for personal reasons not to risk climbing through the icefall. It was sometimes a frustrating experience for him at base camp to see events unfold on the mountain: ‘Sometimes it was very, very hard to take not being involved in the climbing. Because you’re not climbing, you have to bite your tongue. You can see things happening but since you’re not going through the icefall, you can’t really voice your opinions.’²⁴ The selfless contributions of Allen and numerous other support personnel, as well as the entire climbing team, led to the ABEE’s achievement.

The contribution of another non-climbing member of the ABEE should be acknowledged. Andrew Rothfield was a thoroughly competent treasurer and, as Mike Rheinberger put it, ‘ran the finances with an iron hand’.²⁵

Turning to an analysis of the climbing itself, some controversy was raised by the summit attempt of Zac Zaharias, Peter Lambert, Jim van Gelder and Bruce Farmer, which reached 8600 m. Although that attempt came close to success, it was viewed in several different ways according to one’s perspective—from a major psychological breakthrough to a useless squandering of eight precious bottles of oxygen.

The controversy surrounding the attempt was centred on two issues: the first being the necessity, or otherwise, for a fifth camp, at about 8350 m on the South-East Ridge—that is, above the South Col. There was much discussion on this point, with Zaharias one of those who believed an ABEE team could climb Everest in a single push from the col. He maintained that his group’s attempt, in less than ideal snow conditions, proved that the mountain could be climbed from camp four in better conditions, so that a camp five was not needed. In the event, Bayne, Cullinan and Muir all climbed to the summit from the South Col without an intervening camp.

Mike Rheinberger, however, was of a different opinion. He argued that the failure of Zaharias’ team proved the opposite—that a fifth camp would greatly increase the chances of success. ‘In fact, it [the failed attempt] was good evidence that Everest *couldn’t* be climbed from the col unless conditions were optimum, which did not often occur,’ Rheinberger said.²⁶

²⁴ P. Allen, Interview.

²⁵ M. Rheinberger, Personal communication.

²⁶ Ibid.

The second issue was whether, in a four-man team, all four should go for the top or whether two should support the other two by breaking trail and carrying loads. In fact, Brookes had recommended, during a lengthy radio call, that two climbers should be chosen from the four for the summit attempt, with the other two in support. This would maximise the chances of success. In the event, this strategy was not used and eight cylinders of oxygen were consumed. This led to some resentment within the team. In defence of Zaharias and his team, however, it is an extremely difficult thing to somewhat arbitrarily assign two fit climbers to a 'support' role when the summit of Everest is so close. Recall (Chapter 22) the personal agony that Rheinberger went through when he decided to work in support of Curry and Bayne and thus forgo his own summit ambitions.

Another critical factor should not be overlooked. The snow condition was not only 'less than ideal', it was exceedingly deep and soft—in a word, horrific. It took Zac's Yaks more than 12 hours to reach the South-East Ridge proper—something that normally took four to six hours. There was simply no way they could have continued in those conditions to the summit and then have expected to all return safely. Had the snow conditions been better, perhaps four ABEE members would have stood on the summit of Everest on their first attempt from the South Col.

All of these issues became academic when Paul Bayne and Pat Cullinan later went to the summit. By then gales had scoured the ridge of loose, soft snow and had greatly improved conditions for climbing. That is not to take anything away from the achievement of Bayne and Cullinan. They climbed without another pair in support and they climbed all the way from the South Col in a single push. Despite their incredible personal efforts, it was still very much a team effort. Just to have become so well established on the South Col that more than one summit attempt could be made was a major victory for the ABEE.

How important was the ABEE ascent, given that the South Col route on Everest had been climbed many times before and that the ABEE success was given scant acknowledgment in the mountaineering press? The simple answer is that it is far more important than most people, including some experienced mountaineers, have given it credit for. It was a most notable accomplishment—like the 1978 ascent of Everest by Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler without the aid of supplementary oxygen and the 1984 first ascent of the Great Couloir by Tim Macartney-Snape and Greg Mortimer without supplementary oxygen—because it broke down a significant psychological barrier. It climbed Everest by the South Col route, usually considered to be one of the longest and most physically demanding routes on the mountain, for the first time without the assistance of high-altitude porters—that is, without Sherpa support above base camp.

It should be noted at the outset that the ABEE climbers did benefit from the presence of the huge tri-nation expedition on the same route. The tri-nation team used massive Sherpa support to climb the mountain. The route from camp three to the South Col was initially established by the tri-nation team, which overtook the Australian team at that point. The ABEE climbers subsequently followed this route. Also, the tri-nation climbers left some tents and oxygen cylinders at the South Col for the Australians to use. The tri-nation oxygen was used while the Australian climbers were in residence at camp four, but all three ABEE summiters climbed only with Australian oxygen bottles carried all the way up the mountain by Australian climbers. So, compared with the massive amount of effort expended by Australian climbers in establishing the route to camp three and particularly in doing all of the load carrying, the help from the tri-nation team was very small indeed. It can be fairly claimed that the ABEE was the first expedition to climb the South Col route without Sherpa support.

As Zaharias noted, it took the entire ABEE team (18 climbers) 11 days to carry and fix the 4000 m of rope and 50 ladders in the icefall. 'As most expeditions contract out this work [to Sherpas], they have no idea how demanding and dangerous this work is, taking it completely for granted.'²⁷

The ABEE achievement is thus no mere gimmick. John Roskelley, arguably America's best Himalayan climber at the time and certainly one of the world's best, had put forward the proposition that Western climbers should do just what the Australians did in 1988: refuse to use Sherpas as paid high-altitude porters on Everest expeditions. Ironically, Roskelley put forward this proposal in 1985—a year after he had returned from the north side of Everest, where he witnessed the record-breaking Australian ascent of the Great Couloir. No doubt his respect for Australian Himalayan mountaineers went even higher when he learned of the ABEE's success in 1988.

Roskelley's arguments are based on ethics: it is unethical, or at least very bad style, to pay Sherpas to do all of the dirty work in the Khumbu Icefall—that is, to shoulder most of the risk associated with climbing Everest via the South Col route. According to Roskelley, there are only two ethical courses of action: either include Sherpas as fully fledged members of the expedition or do all of the load carrying through the icefall yourself. So, from the ethical point of view, the ABEE ascent was without Sherpa support. Not a single Sherpa was paid by the ABEE to work on its behalf above base camp.

A second aspect is related to the physical load taken off Western climbers by high-altitude porters. On the usual ascent of the South Col route, climbers make only a few trips through the icefall—perhaps two or three to aid acclimatisation early in

27 Z. Zaharias, Correspondence.

the expedition and then the final trip through on the summit attempt. Meanwhile, while the climbers rest at base camp and marshal their strength to push to the top, the Sherpas do all the hard physical work of establishing the route and camps, putting in the ladders and fixing ropes in the icefall and carrying all of the gear and supplies, particularly the bottled oxygen, up the mountain. In many cases, the Sherpas are also in residence in the higher camps to prepare the meals and melt snow for drinking water as the Western climbers move through on their summit attempt.

Jon Muir was under no illusions about the magnitude of the task the ABEE had undertaken:

You wouldn't believe the difference climbing without Sherpas! I've seen a lot of these other expeditions, like recent American and Dutch expeditions. The Sherpas do everything—fix the icefall, carry loads, set up camps, cook meals. All of those things take tremendous effort at high altitude. Then the climbers just come along with day packs, following the Sherpas.²⁸

It is hard to imagine the physical and psychological stress the ABEE team endured. Just to get camp three established partway up the Lhotse Face and most of the gear up to the top of the Western Cwm required on average 15–20 carries by each climber. A 'carry' is a major effort: a very hard day's work hauling 15–20 kg loads at 6000 m or higher. Then, when fatigue, exhaustion and the physical deterioration associated with operating at high altitudes for a long period had truly set in, the climbers had to make a carry to the South Col—that is, in effect climb an 8000 m mountain carrying a load! Soon after that, those still able to function at extreme altitudes had to go back up and try to climb Mt Everest, the highest peak in the world! All the while the repeated trips through the treacherous Khumbu Icefall would be eating away at the climbers' psychological stamina. When viewed in those terms, it is little wonder that the few previous attempts to climb the South Col route without Sherpa support ended with exhausted climbers at or below the South Col. It is a remarkable testament to the overall strength of the team that 15 ABEE members climbed to the South Col at least once (see image 23.1).

Pat Cullinan summed up the achievement:

No team has ever climbed Everest harder than the ABEE... We did it on completely insufficient food, with blood being extracted from us every three or four days [for medical tests], and often when sick. Many climbers lost 10 to 15 kgs, which is a lot for a fit climber to lose... The team took on a real challenge and succeeded against all odds.²⁹

²⁸ J. Muir, Interview.

²⁹ P. Cullinan, Personal communication.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the ABEE's historic ascent was the way in which the summit itself was attained. By rights, Bayne and Cullinan were lucky to have simply survived their long stay at the South Col. After all, they had survived there longer than any other non-Sherpas had previously survived, and they did so after an extremely long and arduous period of work at very high altitudes. By any reckoning, they should have been in no condition to go for the summit. What drove them to go for the top under such conditions and how risky was their decision?

With his background as a medical doctor, Jim van Gelder was in a good position to comment on the pair's decision to go for the top after such a long stay at the South Col: 'By all standards of mountaineering sense, their decision to go for the summit was crazy. The chances of death were high and the chances of brain damage almost certain. But for some weeks before both had been adamant that they were going to climb the mountain.'³⁰

Van Gelder's last comment points to the extremely delicate balance in mountaineering between the determination needed to push one's body to its ultimate limits and the foolhardiness in pushing it past them. Or as Brian Agnew puts it, 'There's a very thin line between courage and madness.'³¹

It is the judgment of how close one is to that line that often spells the difference between success and tragedy in the Himalaya. The decision by Bayne and Cullinan to go for the top evoked strong reactions from other ABEE climbers. Most agreed with van Gelder that it was madness and that the risk of tragedy was unacceptably high.

Pat Cullinan's determined struggle to the top evoked the most comment. He was well known to the rest of the AAA climbers, while Bayne, on his very first Himalayan expedition, was very much an unknown quantity. Furthermore, even by his own admission, Cullinan was not as skilled or as physically strong as many of the other climbers on the ABEE team.

Peter Lambert's reaction to Cullinan's ascent was perhaps typical. On Broad Peak, Lambert came perilously close to his own personal limit and vowed never to come that close again. He believed that on Everest, Cullinan pushed himself far too close to his personal limit. Nevertheless, Lambert had enormous respect for Cullinan's determination.

'He was mad and he was dangerous,' Lambert remarked. 'Maybe that's what it takes to get to the top of a mountain like Everest, but it wasn't for me. Pat was a physical wreck—he had a bad chest infection—but he still pushed himself to the top. The mental side of climbing is so important.'³²

³⁰ J. van Gelder, Interview.

³¹ B. Agnew, Interview.

³² P. Lambert, Interview.

Zac Zaharias shared Lambert's opinion: 'Pat has had the goal of climbing Everest for a long, long time. He's not a very good climber technically and not very strong physically, but he has incredible determination.'³³

'Pat was always one of the slowest climbers on the mountain,' van Gelder recalled. 'During the load-carrying phase, you'd be on your way down from a camp and there would be Pat still struggling on. But he obviously has the ability to just keep going about the same speed no matter what altitude he's working at.'³⁴

How did Cullinan himself view his decision to start out for the top in such an exhausted state? For him, it was a problem of literally taking one step at a time:

You can always go one more step. I certainly looked at it that way on Everest. You get to the point where you think you can't go on any more. Then I'd say to myself mentally, 'I can go on. I can go one more step.' And the fact of the matter is you can.³⁵

I was very fortunate in being with Paul, with his incredible determination. He's a far better mountaineer than I. But I never give up—I've never pulled out of anything. I wasn't going to let Everest be the first time I pulled out of anything.³⁶

What is even more impressive about their successful ascent is that the top part of the climb—from camp four to the summit—is the most technically difficult part of the South Col route. Even a Himalayan climber as experienced as Jon Muir was impressed by that segment of the route: 'I was amazed by the difficulty—it wasn't easy at all. I found there was another steep step before the Hillary Step, and lower down there were steep bowls of light snow covering rubble that made for very treacherous climbing. It was steeper and harder than I thought.'³⁷

Another factor that increased the difficulty of their ascent, particularly given their slowed mental function at that extreme altitude, was a psychological one. 'There is a big mental jump when you set out on your own above the col,' James Strohfeldt pointed out. 'You are suddenly beyond the fixed ropes, beyond the "umbilical cord" by which you can always descend in safety. Above the fixed ropes you're doing it on your own and you have to take responsibility for your own safety.'³⁸

A further interesting question is why, given their very slow rate of climbing and their obvious weakened condition, did they not stop at the South Summit or earlier and return to the col? After all, most climbers, particularly at those extreme altitudes, monitor their own condition closely and if they have not reached the summit by

33 Z. Zaharias, Interview.

34 J. van Gelder, Interview.

35 P. Cullinan in Ryan and Humphrey, *One More Step*.

36 P. Cullinan, Interview.

37 J. Muir, Interview.

38 J. Strohfeldt, Interview.

a certain time or if they are simply feeling too bad, they turn around and descend. For example, the earlier ABEE summit attempt ended near the South Summit when the climbers realised they were moving too slowly and they returned to the col.

Bayne's response was direct:

If you've left any escape valve in your head, you'll use it. You'll turn around and go down. You need that hard push to succeed. You'll always feel very, very bad, so that in itself is not a good enough reason to turn back. You need something to happen, some event, to make that decision for you.³⁹

To a large extent, Cullinan relied on Bayne to make any decision to turn back:

On the climb from the South Col I felt really, really crook. I just followed Paul. And I said to him, 'If you turn back, I'll turn back.' After sitting with Paul in a tent for six days at the South Col, I knew if he turned back, then the situation would be serious and he would need help. But he didn't turn back.⁴⁰

All in all, the ascent of Everest by Bayne and Cullinan was a feat of almost superhuman stamina—physical and mental—and of an unwavering determination. 'This isn't the sort of achievement that comes from just running around the block a few times or pumping iron in a gym,' ABEE doctor Tony Delaney pointed out. 'It demands extreme mental fortitude, and a clear idea you're going to come back alive.'⁴¹

So, how close were Bayne and Cullinan to stepping over that line between courage and madness? By every conceivable indication, they were very, very close. It would undoubtedly have taken a very minor perturbation—such as a small storm or even just a strong, unexpected gust of wind—and they would have been in serious trouble. In the end, however, they were able to find within themselves whatever it took to keep going, to take that one more step.

The ascent by Jon Muir and the near-ascent by Chris Curry also deserve comment. Muir had nearly missed his last chance for the summit when even his legendary strength began to be sapped. Earlier, while in residence with Dad's Army at camp three, he suddenly became ill. 'From feeling great to vomiting vigorously took about half a minute,' Muir recalled. 'Litres of precious liquids gushed forth and amongst it all, a 20 centimetre roundworm.'⁴² Dehydrated and weakened, Muir had no choice but to return to base camp to rest and rid himself of the worms. It appeared that the incident marked the end of his chances to reach the summit.

39 P. Bayne, Interview.

40 P. Cullinan, Interview and personal communication.

41 T. Delaney in Ryan and Humphrey, *One More Step*.

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

When anxiety was reaching very high levels at base camp as Bayne and Cullinan made their do-or-die push for the top, a rested and very much stronger Muir was an obvious choice to move back up the mountain for the anticipated rescue operation. Muir certainly made the most of his unexpected opportunity. Learning that Bayne and Cullinan had reached the summit and had descended safely to the South Col, he and Chris Curry moved up to camp two at the head of the Western Cwm to help the exhausted climbers down from the col if necessary.

Moving as quickly as they could, Muir and Curry climbed the whole of the Lhotse Face in a single day and, after learning to their great relief that Bayne and Cullinan could descend unassisted, decided to keep going up. After a short rest at camp four, Muir and Curry set out about midnight for the top of Everest. The next day, just after 11am, Muir was on top. He had climbed from camp two in the Western Cwm to the summit in just more than 30 hours—at that time a record for the quickest ascent of Everest. The previous fastest time was about 40 hours, from the foot of the North Face. The head of the Western Cwm and the base of the North Face are at about the same altitude.

It was a vintage performance by Muir. James Strohfeldt was particularly impressed by the ascent: Muir ‘was so much stronger than anyone else on the trip. He was never “not strong”, always a powerhouse. Some people have good and bad days, but not Jon. He was always strong.’⁴³

Muir, however, certainly had competition as the expedition’s fittest and toughest climber. When he and Curry climbed back up to be in a position to help Bayne and Cullinan, Curry had just returned from high on the mountain. In fact, he climbed to the South Col three times in all and still had the strength on the last trip up to keep going towards the top. Unfortunately, a leaky regulator on a tri-nation oxygen cylinder forced Curry to turn back at 8700 m—less than 200 vertical metres from the top. He very nearly became the fourth Australian to stand on top of the world in 1988.

It was a real injustice that a technical failure cost Curry his chance for the summit as he had put in so much work on the mountain. He, like Muir, was strong throughout the expedition and was always willing to carry extra loads and do extra tasks. He had come a long, long way since 1984 when Geof Bartram guided him to the summit of nearby Pumori.

Muir’s quick dash to the top at the very end of the expedition therefore put an emphatic final stamp on the Australian effort. Despite the sometimes bitter and acrimonious conflict during the trip and despite the considerable consternation at base camp caused by Bayne and Cullinan’s death-defying performance above the

43 J. Strohfeldt, Interview.

South Col, the ABEE was a resounding success. Three Australians had climbed Mt Everest in the bicentenary, all team members had come back alive and without serious injury and, to top it off, the ascent had been made in good style.

ABEE leader, Austin Brookes, summed up the significance of the feat:

What in fact stood out was the real commitment to a team effort by all of the climbers. To climb Everest by the South Col route is not particularly difficult, but to accomplish this in a particular year was the main problem, particularly as we had decided to dispense with high altitude porters...The three who made it to the top obviously made outstanding efforts but to get enough gear to the South Col for eight to attempt the summit was the result of a fine team effort.

The only regret I have is that Chris Curry and Mike Rheinberger didn't get a 'fair go' at the summit, for their contributions were truly outstanding. However, there were others who simply bugged themselves getting the gear to the Col—they knew they were reducing their chances of personal success in making their efforts but they made them nonetheless. That, I think, was the main thing that remains in my memory. Twenty-five Australians wanted an Australian to climb Everest in 1988 and put their heart and soul into achieving that.⁴⁴

Peter Gratton, who had by 1988 become General P. C. Gratton, AC, OBE, Chief of Defence Force, was delighted by the magnificent achievements of the ABEE team—and particularly of the AAA climbers: 'The contribution that these fellows made, and the example this will set for young men and women in the army for many years, is absolutely outstanding.'⁴⁵ Gratton's adventure-training program, set up after his trek to Everest base camp in 1975, had indeed paid handsome dividends.

Gratton, who was in a very good position to recognise outstanding leadership, was most impressed by the effort of Brookes in leading the ABEE to its success: 'I thought we were well served by Austin, particularly bearing in mind the very diverse nature of the climbers. We were lucky to have him.'⁴⁶

It had been a long haul for the AAA since their first trips to New Zealand in the late 1970s. After initial success on Tseringma in 1980, their next venture into the Himalaya had ended in tragedy on Ganesh IV in 1981 when Dave Sloane was killed in an avalanche. They persevered, however, following that with a solid base of climbing on trekking peaks and Denali, a successful ascent of a difficult route on Nilgiri North and the climb of Broad Peak—one of the 14 peaks of more than 8000 m. Now Cullinan's magnificent effort capped more than a decade of military mountaineering with success on the world's highest mountain—arguably the most coveted prize in Himalayan mountaineering.

⁴⁴ A. Brookes, Personal communication, 1 November 1989.

⁴⁵ P. Gratton, Interview.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

The ABEE ascent of Everest also marked the end of the mountaineering career of Pat Cullinan, the most enigmatic of all Australian Himalayan climbers. Before his exhausting, nerve-wracking, desperate push to the top of Everest, Cullinan had already decided to hang up his boots. Before the expedition left Australia, he had promised his wife, Sharon, that, whether he reached the top or not, he would retire from climbing. In addition, he realised how close he had come to overstepping even his considerable limits. ‘I’m lucky to still be alive,’ he said after the Everest ascent. ‘When I get on a mountain, I’m pretty determined to get to the top.’⁴⁷

Cullinan’s career had begun in unusual fashion—he had taken up climbing as part of his duties as commander of a Special Air Service (SAS) unit—and had ended in an equally unconventional way: with his controversial and very risky decision to tackle the most difficult and dangerous part of the Everest climb in a seriously weakened and rapidly deteriorating condition. It was not the first time Cullinan had courted disaster by staying high on a big mountain. His ascent and subsequent rescue of Karl Fassnacht on Broad Peak had also raised doubts about his mountaineering judgment. In the most important decision of all, however—when to call it quits—Cullinan had shown he had the self-knowledge and ability to clearly think out the consequences of his actions, and thus ultimately to survive. The Himalaya are littered with the bodies of those who did not know when to stop.

So, with the ABEE success on Mt Everest in 1988, ended the unusual career of Pat Cullinan—above all else, a testament to drive and determination of the most extraordinary kind.

47 P. Cullinan, Interview.

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