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A quiet achiever

A few days' trek south of Pumori lies the graceful Ama Dablam (6854 m), the most beautiful mountain in the Khumbu and, according to some observers, the most beautiful mountain in the world. Beauty notwithstanding, Ama Dablam is a severe mountaineering challenge by any line of attack. It took the formidable trio of Tim Macartney-Snape, Lincoln Hall and Andy Henderson to make the only Australian ascent of the peak (in 1981; see Chapter 9), despite two subsequent attempts by strong parties.

The first of these was a 1985 winter-season attempt by a New Zealand expedition that included Queenslander Robert Staszewski. It was not a happy trip for Staszewski, who had a nasty brush with cerebral oedema that put an abrupt end to his summit attempt.

Staszewski said:

In the chill of pre-dawn greyness my stumbling effort to rise on the 8th [December] clearly indicated poor acclimatisation. Severe acute mountain sickness [cerebral oedema] had caused fluid retention in my brain leading to concussion. The internal bruising was already causing loss of coordination, blurred vision, slurred speech and eventually—possible death. The magnetic poles immediately reversed. I forgot the summit, and fixed my gaze on base camp and lower. What followed was a deteriorating nightmare of subconscious stumbling, constant weariness, dehydration, swimming horizons, and assistance from friends.¹

Further illness and deteriorating weather forced the abandonment of the expedition a short while after Staszewski's epic retreat.

1 Staszewski, R. 1987, 'Ama Dablam in winter', *Damart Newsletter*, p. 5.

The second attempt on Ama Dablam—this time in 1989 on the South-West Ridge—was led by Michael Groom and was nearly successful. Groom and John Coulton were forced to back off only 60 m from the top by unstable snow conditions and a lack of time. It was an exciting and enjoyable route, according to Groom, who described it as ‘good rock climbing followed by good ice climbing’.²

Of far more significance than the near-success was that the 1989 Ama Dablam expedition marked the return to the Himalaya of Mike Groom. His career leads back to the giants, the 8000 m peaks: first back to an amazing ascent of the world’s third-highest mountain, a story of extraordinary courage and determination; and then forward, in the final chapter, to a climb that contributed to Australia’s most successful year ever in the Himalaya.

Michael Groom could well be called Australian mountaineering’s quiet achiever. He is exceedingly modest about his considerable achievements, preferring to keep a very low profile within the climbing community. His only article for many years—on the 1986 Kangchenjunga attempt—was written for *Wild* magazine in a moment of dire need. ‘Unfortunately, I was desperate for money before I left,’ he admitted, ‘and was given \$200 in advance for the article.’³

The early part of Groom’s Himalayan career was described earlier: his climbing on the Trisul and Annapurna II expeditions (Chapter 10) and on Kangchenjunga (Chapter 17). These earlier trips hinted at Groom’s future string of Himalayan achievements, particularly the 1986 Kangchenjunga expedition, on which he nearly reached the summit.

Groom is unique among Australian Himalayan mountaineers in that his start in the activity of climbing was truly a family affair, with a connection with exploration and adventure going back three generations. His grandfather was a keen explorer and was one of two men who established the Binna Burra Lodge adjacent to Lamington National Park in south-eastern Queensland.

His father, Donn Groom, was a pioneer of rock climbing in Queensland, having explored the Glasshouse Mountains and done some of the early climbing on Mt Barney. The elder Groom also had considerable New Zealand experience, with ascents of Mounts Tasman and Malte Brun and participation in a difficult rescue on Mt Cook.

‘My father had me scrambling around Mt Barney before I was in school,’ Michael Groom remembered. ‘After he later went to Alaska to live, I went up there for a year and he took me up a few “hills”.’⁴

2 M. Groom, Interview.

3 M. Groom, Personal communication, 7 November 1989.

4 M. Groom, Interview.

With a background like that, it was no surprise that Groom soon found his way to New Zealand, enrolling in a Mountain Recreation course in the early 1980s. The trip to Trisul, in 1982, followed soon thereafter. From Groom's point of view, it was an interesting experience—an encounter with a severe storm on his first trip to the Himalaya.

We were in camp three—three North Face tents—when a storm built up quickly during the night. One tent, the one I was in, blew away. Then I got blown over twice just crawling to the next tent. I piled in with three Americans in the VE24. The wind picked us up, tent and all. We had to dive for the end to keep the tent on the ledge. Then that tent blew apart. At morning there was a slight break, and we headed straight down.⁵

The Trisul trip, however, did have two tangible benefits, as well as the accumulation of experience, which any excursion in the mountains, no matter how disastrous, could be said to have. The other Australian client on the trip, in addition to the three Americans, was Melbourne climber John Coulton (see image 26.1), and he and Groom would later form a powerful partnership on Kangchenjunga.

Of more immediate benefit was the link with Tim Macartney-Snape and Lincoln Hall, who were two of the guides on the Trisul trip. A year later, Groom joined that duo, Greg Mortimer and Andy Henderson on the Annapurna II expedition. That ascent, by a new, impressive route up the South Face, was a key climb in the lead-up to the 1984 Everest success (see Chapter 10). Through Groom's eyes, though, on his second trip to the Himalaya, the expedition looked a little different.

I went on the trip with the intention of learning. I had somewhat of a tough time lower down, about 6000 m, but when I made it up to camp three at 7300 m and felt all right, I asked Tim if I could go to the top. He said no, as it would break up two ropes of two climbers each. I was very disappointed at the time, but I realised that these guys were world-class climbers, and that I was still learning.⁶

It was not long before Groom was putting in some world-class performances himself in the Himalaya. In 1986, he nearly pushed to the top of Kangchenjunga as leader of a five-man team (see Chapter 17). He turned back at 8400 m, only 200 m from the top after a very strong performance on the summit day.

Groom recalled:

At 8.30 am on the 12th of May I left Camp IV [7750 m] for the summit, a late departure after discussing with Shane [Chemello] and Jim [van Gelder] as to what they would do. When I left the tent, I still wasn't sure. A couple of hours climbing

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

and I was in the Gangway, from which I could see Shane and Jim climbing above Camp IV. Shane would reach 7,900 m and Jim would go on to reach around 8,000 m before turning around.

I continued to make good progress until at 1.30 pm at 8,400 m I stopped to consider the remainder of the climb. I felt as well as one could feel at this height and calculated that it would take another three hours or more to reach the summit. This was fine by me but what I had to consider was that my two climbing partners were already exhausted and we were a long way from the safety of Base Camp.

By climbing to the summit and back to Camp IV I too would undoubtedly have been exhausted, and three exhausted climbers high on Kangchenjunga allowed no room for error or problems with the weather. Safety was more important to me than the summit, especially on the first expedition I was leading to the Himalaya. After all, I could always return to Kangchenjunga another time.

I was not fooled by a passing cloud into thinking the weather was deteriorating, but it helped make my decision a little easier. So I started to descend. Along the way I would stop occasionally to look up at the summit and think to myself 'maybe I should have'.⁷

Fired by the determination to turn that 'maybe' into something more definite, Groom went straight to the Ministry of Tourism in Kathmandu at the conclusion of the expedition and reapplied for Kangchenjunga. His application was successful for the same route a year later, in the post-monsoon season of 1987.

Groom's second Kangchenjunga attempt was an astounding performance, the equal of any other Australian exploit in the Himalaya. It is, however, without doubt the least well known of any major Australian achievement in the great ranges of Asia and has received hardly a mention in the international mountaineering literature.

Confident of his own ability to climb the mountain, the world's third highest, Groom opted for a team of only two and asked John Coulton, whom he remembered from the Trisul expedition as a 'very strong and competent climber',⁸ to join him.

From their arrival in Kathmandu on 3 August, the pair was faced with adversity—of a sometimes extraordinary nature—that plagued them for the duration of the trip. The first blow was struck even before the walk to base camp began, as floods and massive landslides—the worst disaster in Nepal for years—forced them to walk for three days along washed-out roads just to get to the start of the trek. Twenty-three soggy days later, they finally arrived at base camp.

7 Groom, M. 1986, 'Himalayan apprenticeship', *Wild*, no. 22 (Spring), pp. 55–6.

8 M. Groom, Interview.

Their long route on Kangchenjunga's South-West Face forced them into some difficult tactical decisions. A totally alpine-style ascent would be very risky, particularly since some icefalls along the way would no doubt slow their rate, force extra days on the mountain and thus require them to carry more supplies. Establishing well-stocked camps, however, would sap their strength, possibly before they had a chance at a viable summit bid.

They opted for a mixed style, setting up three camps lower on the mountain while they acclimatised and stocking the top camp with 10 days' worth of food and fuel to use as a launching pad for the summit. After a month of work, and then a break at base camp, they were ready to go for the top.

Groom said:

On October 7 we started up and moved the tent from camp one to two. We didn't have enough tents to leave them permanently at each site. Two days later we set out from our top camp with heavy loads and moved up to 7900 m, where we established camp four.

On October 10 we went for the top. We got started at 7.30am, later than we wanted, but the extreme cold and high altitude slowed us down. We moved unroped, taking turns breaking trail up a 50–55-degree gully. About 1pm, it was John's turn to take over, but he took a long while to catch up.

We were at 8400 m and John said that he'd had enough. I almost said, 'Yeh, I've had enough too', but then I realised that we were at precisely the same spot at which I had turned around last year. I didn't say anything. I just put my pack down and went up. I climbed up onto the West Ridge and kept going.

The climbing steepened up after our stop, with some 3–5 m rock walls, necessitating some scrambling, interspersed with big ledges. Finally, at 6.15pm, I was on top, or at least about 8 m from the top, where I stopped in deference to local religious beliefs.⁹

Coulton reached the summit a little later in the evening. Shortly thereafter began a most frightening and desperate descent for the two exhausted climbers. Their vision failing due to retinal haemorrhaging, they fought their way down Kangchenjunga on instinct and determination. At one point, in an incident somewhat reminiscent of Joe Simpson's miraculous escape from death on an Andean mountain, described poignantly in *Touching the Void*, Groom walked into a gaping crevasse, landed on a snow bridge, then had enough presence of mind and climbing instinct to extricate himself. The descent eventually ended with a helicopter evacuation to Kathmandu.

9 Ibid.

Kangchenjunga 1987

Michael Groom

It was 6.15pm on 10th October 1987. There was another 8 m to go to the summit of Kangchenjunga, but out of respect for local beliefs that the summit was sacred I went no further. There was no sense of achievement standing on the third-highest point in the world but there was a fantastic view off to the west. The sun had set behind the curve of the Earth and I could make out the dark silhouette of Everest on the western horizon. What made this position even more spectacular was that I was standing in the only patch of sunlight anywhere. It was night-time in the valleys below and the fine line between night and day was fast approaching where I was standing. It was time to go after one quick photo.

I expected to meet John following my tracks up the ridge as I descended from the summit. After 15 minutes, the difficult and time-consuming sections of the West Ridge began to look very unattractive in what little light was left. A shortcut across the South-West Face that I had mapped out while climbing up earlier that day was the way I chose to go, even though I knew it was not a wise thing to do on such a high mountain so late in the day. Nevertheless, I lost height quickly and it seemed I had made the right decision until I came to a 12 m cliff just short of entering the gully which led down to C4 [camp four]. It was almost dark but I could see that a fall from here would only stop somewhere below C4. I managed to climb down the first 6 m with difficulty but in complete darkness I could find no more holds so I was forced to climb back up. Faced with the long climb back up to the West Ridge, which I knew would be impossible in my exhausted state, I composed myself and once again faced the 12 m cliff.

I hung onto handholds and footholds which I couldn't feel inside of double boots and three pairs of gloves. It was more good luck than good climbing that I found myself walking away from the base of the cliff.

I stumbled across my pack, which I had left well below the West Ridge. Sitting down, I began to wait for John, impatiently and in the bitterly cold night. While waiting I felt this strange sensation, and when I looked up to see John's headlamp on the ridge, I knew there was something wrong with my eyes. I could not tell how far away he was from me. I didn't know it at the time but it was retinal haemorrhage.

It seemed to take forever for John to reach me. I asked him to lead, not wanting to concern him with my problems, and I followed as best as I could. But it was the blind leading the blind as John had the same problem. Soon the full moon would be up, but it made no difference to what little we could see as we descended by feel and sense of direction.

After two or three hours we were down at the approximate altitude of C4, 7900 m. Feeling confident that our tent was around here somewhere, I took over the lead from John. As we traversed across steep snow slopes to our right, John started to lag behind. A dark line, which I took to be a crevasse, appeared in front of me. Kneeling down and looking as best I could, I was excited by the idea that this was the crevasse that we had so easily stepped across this morning just above C4.

I stepped out confidently. But it was a step into the unknown as I felt the sickening sensation of falling. Bouncing off the walls of the crevasse two or three times, I came to a sudden stop on the bottom, so I thought. Stunned by the impact, I could so easily have drifted into unconsciousness, but the warm blood running from my nose, and the freezing snow stuck to my face, helped bring me back to my senses. My first thoughts, apart from that I had obviously stepped over the wrong crevasse, was that my left leg, hanging awkwardly underneath me, was broken. It didn't take me long to figure out that I had, in fact, landed on a false floor of the crevasse and my left leg had broken through and was dangling over the chasm below.

Although I didn't want to move for fear of falling further, I managed to crawl on my elbows in complete darkness to the wall of the crevasse. Luckily my ice axe was still strapped to my right hand. I was able to strike the ice above me, but it took several strikes before the axe would stick. Using both hands to pull myself up, and with my heart racing, I put all my weight on both feet, without breaking through. Fortunately the downhill wall of the crevasse was not as steep as the one I had just fallen over. Although I could not see where I was going, I was able to climb the short steep wall by using my ice axe to chop handholds. I was able to crawl out of a potentially fatal mistake with no more than a broken nose and a couple of cracked ribs.

Suddenly the light from John's head-torch appeared above me, and it was then that I realised how far I had fallen. I warned him of the crevasse and he was able to find his way around to join me below. Too tired to give details as John sat beside me in the snow, I set off in search of the tent.

Despite the light of the full moon, my eyes had failed me. I was still stunned by the fall; I was climbing on luck. Knowing I wouldn't be so lucky if I fell into another crevasse, I returned to John's position. The only safe solution was to stay where we were until daylight, and as we dug out a seat in the ice, John complained of his failing eyesight.

It had been -20°C in the tent the night before but that temperature was taken after three hours of body heat and three hours of cooking on the stove had warmed the tent. We had nothing to eat or drink and no extra clothing to protect us from what would be the longest night of our lives. The night dragged by while I refused to look at my watch. Occasionally I would stand up to look for the tent.

The most wonderful sight I have seen in a long time was the sun coming up over the eastern slopes of Kangchenjunga on the 11th October. With more light came better vision and a sight that I really didn't want to see: our tent less than 100 m from where we were sitting!

Leaving John to put on his crampons, I climbed down to the tent, fell inside, and crawled into my sleeping-bag. Several hours passed before I woke to find that John had not arrived. Outside I found a set of tracks going down to C3 [camp three], but as I was not able to see well I couldn't see if John was below or not. Quickly packing everything at C4, I started down at around 10.30am, but trying to carry what John and I had carried up was more than I could manage.

With a worsening cough, which I thought was the start of pulmonary oedema, I had to stop every 10 or 30 m. I was tempted to sit and never get up. By late afternoon I reached C3, but there was still no sign of John. I could go no further, so I put up the tent and crawled into my sleeping-bag. My coughing by this stage had become constant and the wind blew with such force that the tent, which I hadn't tied down securely, started to slide off the ledge. I couldn't have cared less. As I could not gain my breath, I lay down and shortly after became unaware of my surroundings except for the strange sensation that there was someone in the tent with me. They had a very strong left hand because they placed it in the centre of my back and lifted me into an upright position. I could see myself sitting up with my head between my knees, and breathing became easier in this position. On the morning of the 12th October I was still sitting in this position and there was no-one in the tent but me.

I knew I had to get to base camp today if I was to survive this climb. Abandoning all of our equipment at C3 except my camera and film, I descended to C2 [camp two] and there I found John. It was here that John told me of his hallucinations which started on the morning of the 11th October at C4. He had seen several tents there, and his mixed up mind told him this camp belonged to someone else so he continued the descent in search of C4. As he descended, he turned to see me following approximately 20 m behind and on a number of occasions he asked me how I was going. These hallucinations continued until he reached the lower altitude of C2, where he came to his senses and realised I was still high on the mountain.

We had our first hot drink since leaving for the summit on the 10th October. We left for base camp, leaving most of our equipment at C2, and by mid-afternoon reached the safety of base camp. A Belgian doctor who was climbing in the area examined our frostbite and said that we might lose the tips of some fingers and toes.

While resting at base camp for a couple of days, we sent our mail runner out to the nearest village which had radio contact with Kathmandu. Tapeljung was six days away but Rinzi made it in three days.

A helicopter was arranged to pick John and me up, a day's walk down [the] valley from base camp. With a dozen porters who had arrived to help us carry our gear out, we left base camp on the 16th October for the hard day's walk to Ramchi, where the helicopter would meet us on the 20th. John was able to walk but I was carried in a cane basket. Because of this, our progress over the moraine of the Yalung Glacier was painfully slow. Although we walked all day, we camped only three hours from base camp. That night it began to snow. Next morning the light snowfall turned into a storm and soon my friends were wading through two feet of snow at the same time someone was trying to carry me with as much care as they could. By mid-morning the storm had turned into what people would later call 'the October storm of 1987'. We were all now lost on the glacier and in danger of dying from exposure in the blizzard conditions.

In an effort to improve the pace at which we were travelling so that we could either find shelter on the glacier or push our luck and try and make it to the lone hut at Ramchi, I hopped out of the basket in which I was being carried and started walking with only a pair of heavy-duty slippers (or base camp booties) on my feet. I knew all too well that what I was doing would only damage my frostbitten toes even more and may even cost me all of them, but I felt at peace now that I was helping to survive this storm rather than be a dead weight on someone's shoulders.

We no longer fought the storm and around mid-afternoon the tents were put up as the weather worsened. It wasn't until next morning that we emerged with the storm having passed during the night.

Under clear blue skies our porters and base camp staff broke trail through deep snow and I followed as best as I could. Our food and fuel supplies had run out the day before and we were now into the fourth day of our one-day walk to Ramchi. This day was the 20th October, the day the helicopter was to pick us up at Ramchi. By nightfall, however, we were still four or five hours short. Once again we set up camp on the glacier, but this time the night was calm.

On 21st October 1987 at 11.30am the co-pilot of the helicopter that had just landed in front of us motioned for us to come quickly. As John and I crawled into the back of the helicopter, I realised that we would finally escape the clutches of Kangchenjunga.

Groom and Coulton had climbed Kangchenjunga, 8598 m, on their own without supplementary oxygen, but they paid a terrible price. Both suffered badly from frostbite—Coulton mainly in the hands and Groom in the feet, and both lost much of their damaged tissue. In fact, Groom not only lost all of his toes, but 2 cm off both feet.

Although the severe frostbite injury to Groom, which occurred in late 1987, put paid to his chances to join the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE) a few months later, it certainly did not end his Himalayan career. Showing the same level of determination that got him to the top of Kangchenjunga (and to the bottom!), he was back in the Himalaya only 15 months later, on the 1989 expedition to Ama Dablam. Although unsuccessful, that attempt put Groom back on track for another impressive achievement in 1990, the year Australian Himalayan mountaineering really came of age.

The decade of the 1980s laid the foundation for a grand slam of impressive Australian ascents in the Himalaya in 1990. In addition, the 1980s was the decade in which Australian Himalayan climbing blossomed more generally, with a growing number of Australian climbers attempting some of the lesser (in height but not necessarily in difficulty or danger!) summits in the great ranges of Asia. Behind the well-known names and their successes stands a large body of Australians, attempting and succeeding on a wide variety of challenging mountaineering projects throughout the Himalaya.

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