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A Himalayan grand slam

By 1990, Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya had come to something of a crossroads. It had been 15 years since Warwick Deacock led the first expedition from Australia to the Himalaya and much had been accomplished in that time. Many of the strands that had been initiated in the mid-1970s had already come to fruition. The Tim Macartney-Snape/Lincoln Hall partnership, launched with the ANU Mountaineering Club's (ANUMC) expedition to Dunagiri in 1978, spearheaded the first Australian ascent of Mt Everest in 1984. Peter Gratton's dream of putting Australian soldiers on top of the world's highest summit revitalised the Army Alpine Association (AAA) and guided its development through the 1980s. It led to the merger with the Melbourne-based Himalayan climbing community, which also originated in the late 1970s, to form the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition (ABEE). This culminated in success through the remarkable efforts of Pat Cullinan, Paul Bayne and Jon Muir, and the large team of climbers who contributed to the ABEE ascent.

This Australian emphasis on Mt Everest was more than just an artefact of the organisation of this book (Chapter 24). Statistically, Australians had paid far more attention to Everest than to the other 8000 m peaks. So, with the major strands of Australian Himalayan mountaineering reaching their logical conclusion with success on Everest, the focal point of so much Australian mountaineering in the Himalaya was gone. Although individual climbers would certainly strive to achieve their personal goal of climbing the world's highest mountain, the glitter of Everest in the minds of the Australian public, and to a certain extent in the mountaineering community itself, began to fade in the late 1980s after two major successes.

What, then, would happen to the overall Australian effort in the Himalaya? Would it too begin to fade as interest in Everest waned? Or would Australian climbers continue to broaden their horizons, as Greg Child had done, and tackle some of the other Himalayan giants or challenging and aesthetic routes on some of the lower peaks?

Those questions were answered in 1990. To any who might have questioned Australian climbers' ability to maintain the momentum after the Everest glory days, they answered most emphatically with their best single year ever in the Himalaya—a grand slam of successes on 8000 m peaks. It was an impressive performance, a most fitting finale to the first 15 years in the Himalaya and a most promising start to the next phase of Australian adventures in the great ranges of Asia.

The 1990 triumphs included three 8000 m peaks not previously climbed by Australians, the first Australian ascent of the world's second-highest mountain, K2, and, perhaps most appropriately, another ascent of Everest, but in an exceedingly bold style with a very unusual lead-up.

Shisha Pangma, the only 8000 m mountain wholly within Tibet, had not, by the late 1980s, even been attempted by an Australian mountaineer. Physically, it was an attractive target. At 8046 m, it was just above the magic 8000 m mark and its North Ridge, originally climbed by a Chinese team, was straightforward technically. The expense and red tape of organising an expedition through the Chinese Mountaineering Association, on the other hand, might have lessened its appeal somewhat.

In May 1990, Shisha Panga became one of three 8000 m peaks to be climbed by Australians that month, and, along with the other 1990 successes, brought the Australian total of 8000 m ascents to seven—half the total number of such peaks. The successful climber was Melbourne-based Mark Lemaire, on only his second trip to the Himalaya. In 1988, Lemaire climbed to 7400 m on the North-East Ridge of Changtse during a commercial expedition led by New Zealanders Shaun Norman and Mike Perry.

The 1990 Shisha Pangma trip was led by another well-known New Zealand mountain guide, Russell Brice, and included another New Zealander, one English climber and two Norwegians in addition to Lemaire. The team scored a solid success on the original Chinese route with Brice, Lemaire and three others reaching the mountain's West Summit, which was only a few metres lower than the main summit, in late May.

Lemaire's achievement on Shisha Pangma, which received scant attention in the Australian mountaineering press, was mirrored by the ascent, earlier in May, of Cho Oyu by Mike Groom, the quiet achiever of Australian mountaineering (Chapter 26).

It was another very impressive climb by the publicity-shy Groom—perhaps not as dramatic as his Kangchenjunga adventure but one that solidified his standing as one of Australia’s premier Himalayan climbers.

Lying just to the south-east of Shisha Pangma on the Nepal–Tibet border, Cho Oyu is another of the technically less difficult (by the standard route) of the 8000-ers. At 8201 m, it is, however, the world’s seventh-highest mountain. Groom, who had just missed the summit of Ama Dablam the previous year, was a member of a Queensland-based team led by Rick White (Chapter 24) and including White’s wife, Jane, and veteran Himalayan climber Steve McDowell (see image 29.1).

The team initially attempted an impressive unclimbed rock buttress on the northern side of the mountain, but was forced back at 6800 m and onto the normal North Ridge/West Face route. Groom was the only climber to reach the top, but his ascent was nearly duplicated by Tony Dignan, who had to retreat from 8050 m due to altitude sickness. The others backed off from lower positions because of problems with the altitude.

Those two climbs—the second of which saw Groom become only the second Australian mountaineer to have climbed two 8000 m peaks (Pat Cullinan was the first, having climbed Broad Peak in 1986 and Everest in 1988)—would, by themselves, have given Australian climbing a most successful Himalayan year in 1990. They turned out to be only the prelude, however, to two stunning achievements that emphasised just how far Australian Himalayan climbing had come in only 15 years.

The first of these was the Australian/American ascent of K2, the monarch of the spectacular Karakoram Range. Often called the ‘savage mountain’, K2 suffers nothing compared with Everest as a mountaineering objective. The approach trek is longer and more arduous; the mountain itself is steeper, more imposing and more beautiful than Everest; it is considerably more difficult technically to climb even by the ‘standard’ route (the Abruzzi Ridge); and it is only 239 m lower than Everest.

Two additional facts indicate the serious nature of any attempt to climb K2. One is that the first British ascent of the mountain was not made until 1986, despite numerous attempts by the cream of the British mountaineering community. Britain is one of the strongest Himalayan climbing nations, its expeditions having made first ascents of many of the highest and most difficult peaks. It was, however, not until Alan Rouse and Julie Tullis summited in 1986 that a British climber had finally conquered K2. Tragically, both perished on the descent.

The second fact is that by 1990 K2 had not been climbed by anyone by any route since that horrific season of 1986, when a record 27 climbers reached the top but 13 were killed. For the next three years, the mountain repulsed all attempts, even by the most experienced and skilled Himalayan climbers from around the world climbing

with the most modern equipment and, in some cases, with the most daring and bold of approaches. There could be little argument that, among the handful of the highest Himalayan mountains, K2 was the ultimate challenge.

Australian mountaineers had attempted K2 only once before—in 1987, when dangerous snow conditions forced Greg Child and Tim Macartney-Snape off the mountain from relatively low altitudes. The pair was part of a seven-person international expedition led by Doug Scott (Chapter 25).

Given those circumstances, one would hardly have put heavy odds on a small group of Australian and American climbers to break the drought on K2 in 1990, particularly since they were not attempting the Abruzzi Ridge but rather a more difficult route on the northern side of the mountain. The team did, however, include two of the very best of Australian Himalayan mountaineers: Child and Greg Mortimer. As described in Chapters 24 and 25, Child had, from the outset of his Himalayan career, climbed at the highest standards on difficult peaks and had by 1990 accumulated an enviable record of ascents and strong attempts. Mortimer was also an extremely skilled climber technically, but had made only two previous trips to the Himalaya. Both, however, were remarkable: successes on Annapurna II in 1983 and on Everest the next year.

The two American climbers on the team were also Himalayan veterans. Phil Erschler, ironically, was a member of the 1984 American expedition on the north side of Everest that witnessed the spectacular ascent of the Great Couloir by the small Australian team. In fact, Erschler was the only member of the American expedition to follow Mortimer and Macartney-Snape to the summit. He and the other American member of the K2 team, Steve Swenson, were also members of Scott's 1987 K2 expedition. Australians Lyle Closs, Peter Keustler and Margaret Werner completed the 1990 K2 team.

The 1990 K2 expedition was Greg Child's second Himalayan trip of the year. Earlier he teamed with American John Roskelley, one of the strongest and most experienced Himalayan mountaineers in the world, to attempt Menlungtse. Roskelley (Chapter 12) was another member of the 1984 American Everest North Ridge expedition that shared the northern side of the mountain with the Australian team.

Menlungtse was one of the plums left in the more heavily frequented parts of the Himalaya. Rising majestically to 7181 m, its summit looks tantalizingly close to trekkers and climbers marching through the picturesque Rolwaling Valley in eastern Nepal. The mountain itself, however, lies wholly within Tibet and thus must be approached from the north. The attendant access problems, combined with its technical difficulty, left Menlungtse, at that time, as the only unclimbed 7000 m mountain anywhere in the Everest region.

If the peak were to be climbed by a two-man team, it would be hard to pick a stronger, more competent pair than Child and Roskelley. Menlungtse's defences, however—in the form of treacherous double cornicing on a knife-edged ridge—proved more than equal to the challenge and turned the two climbers back at about 6500 m.

The Menlungtse retreat was Child's fifth unsuccessful attempt on a Himalayan peak since the 1986 ascent of Gasherbrum IV. That record, of course, is no reflection at all on Child's ability, but rather a testament to the remarkable difficulty of climbing high Himalayan mountains with very small teams in alpine style. The satisfaction of climbing peaks in such style is immense, but the odds of succeeding are lengthened considerably. Now Child would be attempting the difficult and dangerous K2 with a small team and via one of the most difficult routes on the mountain.

While Child had been very active in the Himalaya during the mid and late 1980s, Mortimer had not climbed or attempted a major Himalayan peak since his ascent of Everest in 1984. Nonetheless, he had remained a very active climber. He had started a guiding venture, called Risky Business, for Australians wanting to learn rock climbing or to climb further afield, including trekking peaks in Nepal and remote mountains in Antarctica. Indeed, Mortimer had considerable experience in the southern continent—as a geologist and as a climber. In the summer of 1987–88, he joined Lincoln Hall, Jonathan Chester, Lyle Closs, Chris Hilton and Glenn Singleman to make the first ascent of Mt Minto (4163 m), the highest peak in the Admiralty Range of North Victoria Land. A year later, he teamed with well-known New Zealand mountaineer Colin Monteath and Mike McDowell to climb Mt Vinson (5139 m), Antarctica's highest peak.

A cloud, however, still hung over Mortimer's ability to handle the extreme altitudes of the highest Himalayan summits. On his ascent of Everest in 1984, he suffered badly from the altitude. He needed assistance to descend the mountain and nearly died in a fall near the bottom of the Great Couloir (Chapter 12). For weeks after his return to Australia, he continued to suffer, being described by some as a 'walking zombie', and there were legitimate fears that he had suffered permanent brain damage. He eventually recovered well from the Everest ordeal, but how would he fare in the equally rarefied air of K2—again without supplementary oxygen?

Before Mortimer and his mates could face the challenge of K2, they had to get to the base of the mountain. That was not a trivial task, particularly when they found the Karakoram Highway closed due to political problems and, along with their four Balti high-altitude porters, they had to approach the range via the circuitous and costly route through Beijing to Kashgar by air and then overland across the arid steppes beneath Mustagh Ata.

The northern part of the Karakoram was Eric Shipton country. In the 1930s, the legendary British mountain explorer charted many of the previously unknown ranges and valleys and made many first ascents of the region's peaks. His descriptions of narrow defiles, arid valleys and broad, fast-flowing rivers fed by the massive glaciers above evoke images of one of the harshest mountain areas on the planet.

Little had changed since the 1930s. Timing was still critical on the northern approach to the Karakoram, as meshing the best time to climb on the region's highest mountains with the time when the rivers were fordable left little room for error. The Australian/American team, and their 30-camel caravan, was nearly caught by the treacherous Shaksgam River, its braided channels rising rapidly from snowmelt in its upper catchment. After some debate about the feasibility of attempting a crossing, the climbers and camels plunged into the icy water and struggled across without loss of life, although there was one very close call.

'The second camel on the train carrying our expedition cook stumbled on the far side, and was washed down the river. Somehow both he and the camel managed to find their way to the bank,' Mortimer reported.¹ An Italian team was not so lucky a week later. While attempting to cross the Shaksgam, one climber and three camels were swept to their deaths.

The camel train ended on a moraine wall some distance from the snout of the North K2 Glacier and the site of base camp. Worse still, base camp—much like the base camp on the northern side of Mt Everest—was a long way from the bottom of the mountain. So even before they could contemplate the task of climbing K2, Child, Mortimer and their colleagues had nearly two weeks of tiresome load carrying to get an advanced base camp established at the head of the glacier.

The North Ridge of K2 had received some attention in the past, having been climbed by Japanese and Italian teams. It is one of those classic lines in the Himalaya: clean, direct and steep. In addition, it is free from avalanche danger. And to top it off, it has the very rare quality in a major Himalayan mountain of offering interesting climbing of a consistently high standard all the way up the ridge.

The Australian/American team was not disappointed with the quality of the climbing they found on the ridge.

Mortimer recalled:

Above Camp 2, the climbing is continuously steep through a series of rocky buttresses and snow gullies. It is joyfully exposed and elegant climbing—some of the best anywhere in the world. On the left of the ridge is a very steep face which drops 3,000 metres to the glacier below, while the right is the huge sickle-like sweep of the North Face.²

1 Mortimer, G. 1990, 'K2—savage mountain success', *Hostel Travel*, (YHA magazine), pp. 8–10.

2 *Ibid.*

The team's strategy was to establish four camps on the North Ridge, stock them with sufficient food and fuel for a few attempts by a small team and then go for the summit from the top camp. Fixed rope left by previous expeditions proved useful in securing the route.

Progress on the mountain was aided by unusually good weather, with four and five-day spells of fine conditions common. One of the infrequent storms, however, combined with a lack of acclimatisation, snuffed out the first summit attempt in early August. A week after that first aborted attempt, Child, Mortimer and the two Americans were ensconced in the top camp, at nearly 8000 m, for another shot at K2. They knew that climbing the remaining 650 vertical metres or so to the summit would tax their stamina to the very limit, but they had not counted on a couple of other nasty tricks that K2 still had in store for them.

The first was a small, innocuous-looking basin of snow just above camp four. It proved to be dangerously avalanche prone, with the telltale feeling of reverberations under their feet sending shock waves of fear through the climbers. Mortimer described it as 'walking across a big bass drum which was ready to perforate'.³

Once above that slope, they were confronted with another jolt. What looked from below like a broad wedge of easily angled snow tucked in under the summit proved to be 400 m of 45–50-degree snow and ice. The climbers, tackling the top part of the mountain without a rope, had to face this surprisingly steep and exhausting slope alone. A slip would be fatal.

One by one, they slowly kicked steps up the slope and moved out over the top onto the more gently angled, but long and arduous, final ridge to the summit itself. They had passed the 8500 m mark and were well within the 'death zone'. They had very limited time before severe deterioration quickly set in. The final gentle but long approach to the top of K2 is therefore very much a deathtrap. Once a climber has completed the exhausting push to the top, he is faced with an equally long and tiring plod, with gravity of little help because of the very shallow angle, through sometimes deep snow back across the summit cap. It is no wonder that the death rate on K2 is so high, with many of the deaths occurring on the descent.

Steve Swenson was the first of the climbers to surmount the steep slope and begin the long trudge to the very top. He was moving strongly and had plenty of time to complete the climb and descend before dark. His countryman, Phil Ershler, was, however, having problems. Ershler, at the back of the string of four climbers, was suffering from a severe headache and was having trouble keeping pace with the others. About 200 m below the summit, he stopped, considered his situation at length and then began the descent to camp four. K2 can easily exact the ultimate price for a bad decision.

³ Ibid.

Ersler's decision to retreat was perhaps made easier by the deteriorating weather. The atmosphere around K2 was showing unmistakable signs of instability early in the day and by the time the climbers were approaching the summit, a cloud had descended on the top of the mountain.

After Swenson, Child was the next to undertake the energy-sapping push across the gentle ridge to the top. He had experienced the mental trauma of climbing at 8000 m without supplementary oxygen on Broad Peak in 1986, and here he was 600 m higher. His feelings and thoughts as he finally reached the summit are a riveting account of what it is like to be at extreme altitude in the Himalaya:

I wander around in circles around the summit, stunned to arrive at a place I'd dreamed of for half a lifetime, a place I never really thought I'd reach. Finally, I sit on the snow, lean on my ice axe, and wait for Mortimer.

It's windless, soundless, and surprisingly warm under the blanket of cloud. As I stare down the ridge the line between mountain and heavens begins to merge. 'If it turns to whiteout up here we'll never get down', I think. I check my watch. Somehow, 15 minutes have lapsed since my arrival. It seems like 15 seconds. I wipe my nose and knock an icicle of condensation dangling from it; a drift of snow has formed around my backside. I've been staring statue-like into the void, spacing out the whole time. I recall reading a theory of Messner's about climbers falling into trances on the high summits, and never coming down...

I keep looking at my watch, nervously doing reality checks. Where are you, Mortimer...

Until Mortimer's arrival I'd been so outside myself I'd begun to doubt I was really on the summit. I'd even begun to doubt my own existence. These would seem ludicrous thoughts at sea level, but up here in la-la land, where brain cells are shorting out by the bucket load, anything is possible.⁴

Mortimer reached the summit about 25 minutes after Child. With only a few hours of daylight left and the cloud thickening, they spent a surprisingly long 30 minutes on the summit before starting the descent. They managed to negotiate the steep snow slope in the fading light, but had a nerve-racking traverse in the dark from the bottom of the slope to the tent at camp four.

The ascent of K2 was another brilliant chapter in Child's prolific Himalayan career. Now he had surmounted virtually every kind of difficulty Himalayan climbing had to offer: highly technical rock climbing on the granite towers of the Karakoram, the demanding mixed rock and ice climbing on peaks such as Shivering and Gasherbrum IV and now the extreme altitude of K2. The last was particularly satisfying, as he

4 Child, G. 1991, 'A margin of luck', *Climbing*, February/March, pp. 60–4, 112–15.

climbed it without supplementary oxygen on a beautiful and challenging route. For breadth of skill and experience, there are few climbers anywhere in the world who can match Greg Child.

For Greg Mortimer, the climb was just as rewarding: ‘Climbing K2 is more satisfying than Everest from a climber’s point of view. It is a mountaineer’s mountain. With such a fearful reputation it has more kudos, just to do it successfully where so many have failed.’⁵

With the ascent of K2, Mortimer became one of the very few mountaineers in the world who had climbed both Everest and K2—the world’s two highest mountains—without the help of supplementary oxygen. He was in 1990, of course, the only Australian to have climbed both peaks. Adding his 1983 climb of Annapurna II to his Everest and K2 successes gives Mortimer a short but absolutely astonishing list of Himalayan ascents—the world’s two highest summits and a ‘near 8000-er’—all without supplementary oxygen, all with small teams and all bold ascents in good style on difficult routes.

How did Mortimer’s physiology fare at extreme altitude on K2? ‘I was in a lot better shape after the climb this time,’ he said. ‘I was more conscious of getting up and down quickly, I was more relaxed, and I had more rest in between bouts of climbing.’⁶

The success of Child and Mortimer on K2 was the first Australian ascent of the mountain. It also marked the completion of Australian climbs on the trilogy of the world’s highest mountains: Everest, K2 and Kangchenjunga. It would no doubt be a most appropriate way to conclude the saga of Australia’s first 15 years of expeditioning in the Himalaya. Perhaps the only more fitting way to conclude this story of Australian mountaineering in the great ranges of Asia is to return to Everest and to the most well-known of Australian Himalayan mountaineers of the first era: Tim Macartney-Snape.

From the beginning of Australian expeditioning to the Himalaya, Macartney-Snape was at the forefront. He was a member of the 1978 Dunagiri expedition—the most significant of the early Australian trips. His ascent of Dunagiri was the first Australian ascent of a 7000 m peak and his climb of Annapurna II in 1983 was only the second Australian success at 7000 m or above. In 1984, of course, he and Mortimer were the first Australians to stand on top of the world after their phenomenal ascent of Everest’s Great Couloir. With his climb of the difficult Gasherbrum IV two years later, he had established a Himalayan record unrivalled in Australian mountaineering circles: seven major peaks attempted, six successes, four new routes, one 8000 m peak and two ‘nearly 8000 m’ peaks.

5 Mortimer, ‘K2—savage mountain success’.

6 G. Mortimer, Interview.

So what could Macartney-Snape do in 1990 on Everest that was new, significant and challenging, by either his own standards or those of the international mountaineering community? The answer was deceptively simple: he could climb all 8850 m of the world's highest mountain and he could climb it by himself (above base camp) and without supplementary oxygen—undoubtedly one of the most physically and mentally daunting challenges anywhere on the planet.

Although Everest had been climbed in many different ways, no-one had ever climbed it from sea level. Before the days of the road to Jiri and the airstrip at Lukla, most expeditions started from Kathmandu, which was more than 1000 m above sea level.

The idea for Macartney-Snape's 'sea-to-summit' expedition came originally from adventure film producer Michael Dillon. As noted in Chapter 15, Dillon was also responsible for the original idea that led to the ABEE. The seed for the sea-to-summit challenge, however, was sown even earlier.

Dillon was the producer of the film of Sir Edmund Hillary's 1977 'ocean-to-sky' expedition. That trip took Hillary up the Ganges River by jet boat to its source in the Indian Himalaya. He and his colleagues then climbed a peak at the head of the glacier from which the Ganges emanated. Many people, on seeing the film, mistook the mountain for Everest. That prompted Dillon to ask himself the question: why not do the real thing? Why not climb Everest all the way from sea level?

He mentioned the idea to a climber or two during the early 1980s but received no response. Then in 1985, while filming a trek with Tim Macartney-Snape and Dick Smith, adventurer and publisher of *Australian Geographic*, Smith's wife, Pip, and their family, he brought up the idea again. At that time, however, it was only a year since Macartney-Snape had climbed Everest and, with the hardship of that ascent still relatively fresh in his mind, he was not keen to have another crack at Everest so soon.

Still, the idea took hold and a couple of years later, a definite plan was being formulated. In fact, with the encouragement and support of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the sea-to-summit attempt was to be attached to the ABEE to form a sort of Australian super-assault on Everest during the bicentenary. Those plans were, however, eventually dropped before the ABEE team set out for Nepal in 1988.

The idea was too good to drop altogether and it was quickly resuscitated the next year. Macartney-Snape received official approval for the expedition from Nepalese authorities and Smith promised to support the venture.

In a lead-up reminiscent of Peter Taylor's preparation for his Langtang trip in 1963 (Chapter 3), Macartney-Snape got ready for the biggest climb on Earth by training in one of the planet's flattest areas: the Australian outback. He was based

at Meekatharra, Western Australia, where his wife, Ann Ward, was stationed as a doctor with the Royal Flying Doctor Service. Ward was quite an adventurer in her own right, having led several treks into the remote corners of the Himalaya.

Macartney-Snape's training routine was not quite as monotonous as that of Taylor, who lugged rucksacks full of sand up and down the dunes of Cooper Creek, but rather was a bit more in tune with the technical as well as the physical challenges that lay ahead. Macartney-Snape interspersed his demanding runs across the red desert in the mid 40-degree heat with short, solo climbs on the boulders that dotted the Meekatharra landscape.

The notion of climbing Everest all the way from sea level has a philosophical and romantic attractiveness. As a mountaineering enterprise, 'climbing' the 500 vertical metres from the Bay of Bengal to the Himalayan foothills has a few physical challenges as well. The 700 km walk from the sea through India to the Nepalese border has one of the gentlest gradients anywhere, but the sheer necessity of walking long horizontal distances day after day and the ever-present danger of serious illness make it a challenge, and a risk, that could affect performance on the mountain itself. The trek through India is thus no mere gimmick or holiday, even from a mountaineering perspective.

Although Macartney-Snape would tackle the steep slopes of Everest itself on his own, he was joined on this long trek through India and Nepal by Ann Ward, his sister, Pip, Mike Dillon and Charles Norwood, who drove the Land Rover that carried the group's gear. On the last two weeks of the trek to base camp, the party was joined by Dick and Pip Smith.

Macartney-Snape walked out of the Bay of Bengal at Ganga Sagar on 5 February 1990 to start his epic journey to the top of the world (see image 29.2). Almost immediately, he was confronted with risks. 'The roads in West Bengal are very busy,' he reported in an early dispatch from the trip, 'and I'm constantly on the lookout to avoid being hit by traffic.'⁷

Macartney-Snape's party was responsible for at least one of the frequent traffic jams that slowed progress. At one point, Dillon detoured slightly to inform the participants in a local cricket match that Macartney-Snape was Allan Border's brother. That little joke precipitated a massive traffic jam for at least 5 km as avid cricket fans tried to get close to the Australian party.

⁷ T. Macartney-Snape in 'Sea-to-summit report', *Outside*, (Mountain Designs newsletter), vol. 3, no. 1 (March 1990).

Just as potentially dangerous as the traffic were the insect pests: ‘Already my legs are red from mosquito bites,’ Macartney-Snape continued. ‘We are taking anti-malarial pills but they do not guarantee complete protection from catching a resistant form of the dreaded protozoan that is endemic throughout the area of the first part of my climb.’⁸

Even stiffer challenges lay ahead. After swimming 3 km across the heavily polluted Ganges River, Macartney-Snape headed for the India–Nepal border and the beginning of the hills (see images 29.3 and 29.4). He was in for a nasty surprise when he reached the checkpoint at Jogbani. Due to tensions between India and Nepal, the border was closed to foreigners.

This was a potentially serious blow. Macartney-Snape was on a fairly tight schedule. He had to allow enough time after he reached Everest base camp to acclimatise properly and for reconnaissance climbs on the mountain. If too much time was lost on the trek to base camp, he would have insufficient time to acclimatise or his attempt would be cut short by the onset of the monsoon. Furthermore, any delays on the trek would have to be made up on foot, as to use vehicles or bicycles would negate the concept of climbing Everest from sea level.

The only feasible solution to the impasse was to detour 180 km east to Kharkavitta, where the border was apparently open to foreigners. While Dillon and Pip Macartney-Snape joined Norwood in taking the support vehicle to Raxaul, a border crossing far to the west of Jogbani, Ward bought a bicycle to accompany her husband on the eastern detour.

The alternative route through Kharkavitta added a total of 280 km to the overall journey, which forced Macartney-Snape to up his average rate from 30 to 60 km a day. A rate of 30 km a day, even on flat terrain, is a formidable one for a walker, but to double it would require Macartney-Snape to run for much of the day. In his usual modest way, he understated the task: ‘It wasn’t that far. Only a marathon and a bit every day.’⁹

In fact, he had to cover a marathon and a half each day for three consecutive days to keep on schedule! For most people, this would be an impossible task and, even if they could manage, it would leave them exhausted and in need of a long rest.

For Macartney-Snape, it was only the beginning of the physical hardships. He immediately followed his Herculean effort along the India–Nepal border with a demanding trek through the hills of eastern Nepal. At times, he and his party were wading through chest-deep snow on the high ridge between Bhojpur and the Salpa La.

8 Ibid.

9 T. Macartney-Snape, Public lecture.

In early April, Macartney-Snape and his small party ended their epic walk from the Bay of Bengal and arrived at Everest base camp along the Khumbu Glacier at 5300 m. Now the real climbing would begin.

The area was abuzz with activity as three large expeditions were attempting the South Col route in the pre-monsoon season of 1990. Macartney-Snape's sea-to-summit route brought him into the southern side of the mountain—the opposite side to the one he climbed in 1984.

No doubt he would have preferred a long rest at base camp, but there was much to do in a short time if Macartney-Snape was to achieve his ambitious plans. First was the difficult task of fixing rope for 600 m up to the Lho La and the beginning of the West Ridge. Macartney-Snape planned to climb Everest via the West Ridge and descend the standard South Col route.

‘The West Ridge appealed to me because it is spectacular, had never been climbed solo and would enable me to avoid the three large expeditions... that were attempting to climb the South Col route.’¹⁰

The magnitude of this undertaking should not be underestimated. Ascents of the West Ridge of Everest are rare and traverses of the mountain are even less common. To contemplate such a route—solo and without supplementary oxygen—was bold by any measure. Only one other climber had ever soloed Everest without supplementary oxygen. That was the legendary Reinhold Messner, who in 1980 ascended the mountain via the North Ridge route—arguably the easiest route technically. Even at that, he admitted to being at his absolute limit as he crawled up the last few metres to the summit.

Australians had experienced the difficulty and danger of the West Ridge before. Craig Nottle and Fred From had fallen to their deaths from the ridge on the 1984 post-monsoon attempt (Chapter 20). A year later, Mike Rheinberger and Peter Allen were forced off the ridge by extreme avalanche danger during a New Zealand expedition (Chapter 16) and the AAA abandoned its original idea of an ascent of the West Ridge because of the route's difficulty (but not without heated debate; see Chapter 21).

Macartney-Snape received firsthand experience of the problems of the West Ridge route on his preliminary trip up the lower sections of the ridge. First, fixing rope up to the Lho La proved to be a demanding exercise, even though he shared the task with a small Swiss team that was going to climb on the West Ridge as well. The granite

¹⁰ Macartney-Snape, T. 1991, ‘From the sea to the top of the world’, *Australian Geographic*, no. 23 (July–September), pp. 30–49.

headwall steepened sharply below the pass and gave rock climbing of grade 18 or 19 difficulty—made even harder by having to climb in stiff mountaineering boots and bulky clothing.

After fixing rope to the Lho La, Macartney-Snape moved slowly on up the ridge in the first of two planned acclimatisation sorties. He reached nearly 7500 m, but, although the snow on the moderately angled slopes was excellent for cramponing, he realised that any fresh snowfalls over the hard-packed base would make the slopes dangerously avalanche prone.

After that first preliminary trip up the West Ridge, Macartney-Snape was pinned in base camp by two weeks of bad weather, which dumped heavy snow on the mountain. His fears about the route were realised; to pursue that route would have been unjustifiably risky.

The alternative was the South Col route. Although it is the way by which Everest is most often climbed, it is not the 'yak' route it is sometimes dismissed as. The route is long and physically demanding and the last section from the South Summit to the top is very exposed and offers some tricky climbing.

The fact that Macartney-Snape was attempting it solo added another dimension to the challenge. 'It's far more dangerous by yourself,' Lincoln Hall, Macartney-Snape's long-time climbing companion, noted:

You've got no one to say 'look out' or 'snap out of it' if you're drifting off.

But I've seen how much he [Macartney-Snape] relishes the situations in the mountains. He just buckles right down and deals with everything that is thrown at him. I've been with some people in some really desperate situations and they're just trying to keep their head above water, whereas Tim's swimming and looking around and seeing which way the current's going.¹¹

As it unfolded, it would take all of Macartney-Snape's legendary strength and stamina, and his well-honed climbing instincts, to keep his head above water on Everest.

After two preparatory trips through the Khumbu Icefall to the Western Cwm, he set out for the summit on 7 May. Just reaching the South Col, however, at nearly 8000 m, proved exhausting.

11 L. Hall in Brennan, W. 1990, 'Mountain man', *The Australian Magazine*, 15–16 September 1990, pp. 56–66.

Macartney-Snape said:

Reaching the South Col was incredibly hard. I was carrying a pack with a tent, food, fuel and a movie camera. I was just finding it very difficult, I thought I wouldn't even make the South Col. My legs were giving way on me. I felt very weak and light headed.

Climbing up the Lhotse Face was one of the most difficult things I've ever done. I hadn't psyched myself up for what I found.¹²

From that point, it was sheer determination that lifted Macartney-Snape from the South Col to the summit, just as it had Paul Bayne and Pat Cullinan two years earlier. After his exhausting climb to the col, Macartney-Snape felt light-headed and was plagued by bouts of diarrhoea. He was forced to rest a day before he set out for the summit, at 9.30pm, on the brilliantly moonlit night of 10 May. The top came only after an uncharacteristically desperate and uncomfortable final climb for Macartney-Snape up the South-East Ridge.

Beneath the mountain's South Summit, between 8,230 m and 8,536 m, I inched my way upwards in the terrible -30 C cold. It was now 3 a.m. on 11 May. I was intermittently shaken by bouts of uncontrollable shivering and longed for the sun, which was just beginning to lighten the horizon. I felt terribly tired from the effects of high altitude and was weak from lack of food, having been plagued by nausea and diarrhoea and having eaten little during the previous three days. My legs felt shaky, having just recovered from a severe cramp that had nearly caused me to fall off the mountain at about midnight when I'd stopped to find a better way of carrying my movie camera. The momentum from the year of planning, the effort involved in getting this far and the thought of all those who had helped and encouraged me were all that kept me going...

From an inner pocket of my down suit I took out my water bottle and forced myself to drink a few mouthfuls. Shortly afterwards I vomited. It is difficult to vomit when you are gasping for breath, but I was more upset at losing all the food I had tried so hard to eat at the South Col. What was going to keep me going now?

I was amused to see the contents of my supper freeze into a stalagmite before me. Mercifully the Sun had now risen and, as I slipped my goggles over my eyes to prevent snow blindness, I felt instant warmth. It gave me the surge of strength I desperately needed to tackle the most dangerous part of the climb.¹³

The stretch of Everest's South-East Ridge from the South Summit to the true summit is narrow and corniced, with precipitous drops into the void on both sides. Even the veteran Macartney-Snape was impressed by its seriousness: 'When you climb up here without a rope, it's quite intimidating.'¹⁴

¹² T. Macartney-Snape, Public lecture.

¹³ Macartney-Snape, 'From the sea to the top of the world'.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Slowly, he neared the summit of Everest for the second time:

In the dazzlingly clear air, the panorama below bristled with the most spectacular mountains in the world. The scene made all the risk, pain and hard work worthwhile. As the climbing became increasingly exacting and the view even better, I found myself more engrossed in my position and less concerned with the discomfort of being there. It was truly great to be alive...

At about 9.45 a.m. I took 20 steps without stopping and found there was nothing above me but dark blue space. I was on the summit.¹⁵

It was another remarkable Macartney-Snape performance. He became the first human to climb, entirely under his own steam, from sea level to the highest point on the planet (see image 29.5). His climb was only the second time Everest had been soloed without supplementary oxygen and the first time it had been climbed in such fashion from the south.

This time, however, unlike his first ascent of Everest in 1984, Macartney-Snape at least showed signs of being something other than superhuman. Like other mortals in the high Himalaya, he had to overcome nausea and shakiness, vomiting and breathlessness to reach the top. Even his seemingly unbounded optimism and drive were severely tested. Under the harshest of psychological conditions, however—climbing alone—he persevered and eventually triumphed.

The end of an era

After climbing from the Bay of Bengal to the summit of Mt Everest, Tim Macartney-Snape returned to the red desert sands of Meekatharra. For him, high-altitude climbing was over. He vowed to his wife, Ann, that after the sea-to-summit adventure he would not climb again at the extreme altitudes of the high Himalaya.

Macartney-Snape's retirement marked the end of the career—or at least the extreme altitude facet of it—of Australia's most successful Himalayan mountaineer. His record is astounding. To the impressive list of ascents noted earlier, he added the solo climb of all 8850 m of Mt Everest. His tally stood at nine major Himalayan mountains attempted, seven successes, two bold, imaginative ascents of Mt Everest, without supplementary oxygen, climbs of difficult new routes on Annapurna II and Gasherbrum IV and no deaths or serious accidents on any of his expeditions.

At the beginning of the 1990s, no other Australian mountaineer could match that record. Indeed, there would be extremely few climbers from any country that could come close to that success rate in the Himalaya, particularly on the quality of peaks that Macartney-Snape had tackled.

¹⁵ Ibid.

Macartney-Snape's solo ascent of Mt Everest, the climb of K2 by Mortimer and Child and the other two climbs of 8000 m peaks in 1990 also mark the end of an era for Australian mountaineering in general. Climbers from the world's flattest, hottest continent are no longer such a novelty in the great ranges of Asia. An Australian ascent of Mt Everest is now not such an unusual event. In the 1990s, more Australian climbers viewed a Himalayan expedition not as a difficult, unusual, once-in-a-lifetime goal, but as a natural progression in their alpine climbing careers.

After 1990 Australian Himalayan mountaineering passed into a new era in another way as well. Although there would no doubt be more significant successes by Greg Child, Greg Mortimer, Zac Zaharias, Jon Muir and others from the first generation of Australians in the Himalaya, the next generation of Australian climbers will lead the way in the twenty-first century. Mike Groom, who served an apprenticeship under Macartney-Snape and Hall on Trisul and Annapurna II before going on to lead successful expeditions of his own on two 8000 m mountains, best exemplifies the new group. Groom, some of his colleagues from the mid and late 1980s and others who learned the ropes under the guidance of Australia's best mountaineers on commercial expeditions will form the nucleus of a continuing strong Australian effort in the Himalaya in the next decade and beyond.

Finally, the end of Australian mountaineering's first era in the Himalaya marks the beginning of its first legends. Other countries, with much longer mountaineering histories, already have a rich store of heroes and tales. Britain has the incomparable mystery of Mallory and Irvine on Everest in 1924, Shipton and Tilman's explorations of untouched ranges and first ascents of virgin peaks and the more recent heroes: Bonington, Scott, Tasker and Boardman. France has the ascent of Annapurna I—the first 8000 m peak to be climbed—led by Maurice Herzog and the brilliant alpine careers of Lionel Terray, Gaston Rebuffat and Louis Lachenal. Italy has a rich heritage as well, with climbers such as Walter Bonatti, Riccardo Cassin and Reinhold Messner, and Austria has Hermann Buhl and Peter Habeler.

In the first few decades of this century, Australian mountaineers will almost surely look back on the 1975–90 period as a golden age in Australian Himalayan climbing. They will remember Hall and Macartney-Snape's desperate push along Dunagiri's summit ridge to claim Australia's first 7000 m summit, and the subsequent successes of that powerful partnership. They will remember the sudden emergence of the brash International Turkey Patrol and its tragic fate, and the steady, consistent, impressive string of successful expeditions of the AAA. Greg Child's bold climbing on the daunting granite pillars of the Karakoram will be held in awe, as will his ascent of K2 with Greg Mortimer. Most of all, however, they will remember the first Australian climbs of Mt Everest: the impeccable style and brilliant execution of the 1984 ascent and the dramatic, nerve-wracking, last-minute triumph of the Australian Bicentennial Everest Expedition.

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