

MT ASPIRING THE RAMP AND A BONE COLD NIGHT

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"These are the events on Mount Aspiring from 18th Sept 2016 to 20th Sept 2016 as I recall them."

My tensed trembling limbs, a reaction to my genuine fear of death, was ironically going to be the cause of that fear to be realised. I didn't know how high the cliff was below the slick, steep ice I was scaling up but I was quite sure it was not a survivable fall. My crampons were pointed into the solid blue ice. My lack of experience rocked my confidence in the grip of my crampon spikes, adding to the perpetuating tremble of my limbs. My awkwardly empty left hand pawed at the ice feebly and futilely trying to fashion a grip. My right arm clung to my basic, touring ice axe, which had a rather precarious hold on the solid blue ice wall. I was not tethered to my blunt axe, my leather gloved gripped to the duct tape, which I had wrapped around the otherwise slippery axe handle. This blunt axe point wiggling in the ice was my single point of contact stopping me from peeling over backwards under the weight of the skis on my pack.

Just as I was starting to feel real self-doubt my right crampon caught something mid step, which nearly dislodged the grip on my left crampon. I glanced down to see that my left crampon had come undone and the front point on my right crampon now skewered the loose strap into the ice wall. I had effectively stepped on my shoelace on a tight rope over a canyon with no safety line.

Three days prior I had got a text from a friend saying that if I wanted to join a party climbing and skiing Mt Aspiring that I should call this number and talk to Nick Flyvbjerg who was looking for a sixth party member. "Sixth party member", 6 people on a trip like that rang a little alarm in my head, that is a lot in a party on a hill like that. As my contact told me the names of the guys I recognised two but had never been in the hills with any of them. Joining a six-man team, of whom none I had been in the mountains with, on a mountain like Aspiring. I had reservations.

The season before I had attempted Mt Aspiring with two Austrian ski friends but barely made it out of the Colin Todd hut due to high winds. From the Bonar Glacier I had stood beneath it's sharp pointed skyline summit, the image of which had burnt into my mind and remained ever vivid. Since

standing in its shadow I longed to stand on that sharp summit with skis locked on to my feet. Here was a second chance.

So I called Nick. I had never met Nick but he spent about thirty minutes talking me through the details of the plan. As it turned out, four of the team were going on a larger expedition over several more days. After summiting Mt Aspiring they were then traversing the Snow Drift range before pack rafting out the Dart River for which they had dumped gear at the head of the Dart River. The fifth member, Mike Stewart, was not going on this expedition but instead walking out from the Bonar Glacier via the Quarter Deck Pass and French Ridge Hut down to the Matukituki Valley. As I understood it, my purpose was to accompany Mike on the way out so he did not have to negotiate the glacier travel solo.

All made sense to me now. Four of these guys were guides, all had more experience in this sort of terrain and the use of 'sharps' (axes and crampons) than me, and several had previously summited Aspiring. From our half hour phone call I gathered a very informed and self-effacing sense about Nick – I assumed he was the leader of this expedition. I signed on.

Day one, the six of us heli bumped to Beven Col at 1851m [map note 1], the four traversing the Snow Drift Range stashed some gear to be retrieved after the Aspiring summit then we all did the short shimmy down across the Bonar Glacier and up to the Colin Todd Hut on the other side at 1799m [map note 2]. That afternoon at the hut I got to know the guys as we sat and watched a continuous southerly cloud mass roll over the Waipara saddle at the edge of the savage termination of the Bonar Glacier. It is an awe inspiring but daunting place just to be. With the intimidating peak of Aspiring looming over us and our imminent attempt on its summit, the place gave me an apprehensive excitement. As the sun set and lay a stunning magenta glow over our objective we discussed the route up to the summit before retiring inside the hut for freeze dried hot meals, tea and many mountain yarns.

On the morning of our summit bid I was at the back of the six-man team as we speedily crossed a small bergschrund then began up the steepest part of The Ramp [map note 3]. "No

rope, every man for himself" was the call from one of the team members as we prepared for the steeper pitch. As I was learning the dynamic of the group it had become apparent that there was no clear leader of this group but rather a bunch of mountain mates on a mission. It was also at this point I found out that I was the only one with just a single ice axe, everyone else had either two ice axes or one ice axe and a second tool called a "whippet" or something similar which consisted of the head of an ice axe that attaches to the top of a ski pole. This gives the climber the effect of two ice axes without carrying another whole axe. A whippet is not adequate for purest ice climbing but for the situation I was about to get myself into I would have given one of my fingers to have one.

This infamous piece of terrain, 'The Ramp', is responsible for most of the deaths on Mt Aspiring. It looked simple enough from the Colin Todd hut, even after crossing the bergschrund at the base the first section it felt within my comfort zone. But it was a lure that reeled me into the no fall zone. As we wrapped around, climbing on an angle, the fall line below changed from snow slope to no-fall exposure. The pitch increased and the punchy snow gave way to solid blue ice. Here is where I found myself in that prickly pickle. One crampon had come undone from my boot, the strap of which was skewered into the ice by my other crampon. My right arm clung to an un-tethered inadequate ice axe, my empty left arm awkwardly fumbling for a non-existent handhold and all limbs were trembling with fear and quickly tensing up.

I was well aware that my trembling tense limbs and fear of this situation was the very thing holding me back from solving this problem and not becoming another victim of 'The Ramp'. The five others were above this section and over the crest out of sight, so I was on my own. My first task was pausing, taking deep long breathes, I focused everything into realising that I was stable where I was and I just needed to relax as best I could. Then I assessed everything, what exactly did I need to do to get that strap unskewered and get that left crampon fixed securely back on my boot without slipping off the face. Then slowly, with precision, I conducted each movement with absolute focus and with as little attention as possible to what lay in the fall-line below me. I tightened the last strap, tucked it away so this could not happen again and finally had both crampons pointed firmly into the ice.



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On the lower angle slope to the ridge the snow returned to a punchy crust consistency and I quickly caught up to Sven Gorham on the well-trodden boot pack from the five before me. He was knelt on all fours with his tools lying in front of him. Before I could tell him what just happen on the previous pitch he declared that he was done, between laboured breathes he explained he felt totally exhausted and was not sure why. Sven continued slowly to the safe spot on the northwest ridge where the others were waiting. I walked with him trying to encourage him to continue to the summit but once he reached the ridge he knelt down again and said that this was as far as he was going and he will wait here for the rest us to return from the summit. The weather was perfect, we had lots of time, the area was a safe spot to wait at, so we agreed and the five of us carried on towards the summit.

From the ridge the climb to the summit was simple walking and needed little use of my ice axe. Each side was exposed and some careful footing was required but compared to the pickle I was in on the steep blue ice wall of 'The Ramp' just a few hours earlier, it was basic. I felt good, I had energy. I walked onto the small cramped windy summit just behind the other Nick, Nick D'Alessio. Ben Johns, Mike and Nick Fly were close behind [map note 4].

Yesterdays feeling of apprehensive excitement under the intimidating peak was now stoked accomplishment under a summited trophy. It felt so good to be back down on the Bonar Glacier after knocking that basted off.

Nick Fly powered quickly up to the Colin Todd Hut to get water, this extra exertion combined with possible dehydration may have played a part in his deteriorating exhaustion later. In the quick 30 mins Nick Fly took to go get water, plans were formulated of what to do. Sven was to join Mike and I who were walking out via

However, once Nick Fly got back from getting water he mentioned he was also feeling very exhausted. Nick and Ben then also decided to bail on the Snow Drift Range mission. Suddenly we were all heading to the French Ridge Hut, Sven and Mike were already part way there on the North East side of the glacier, the rest of us were just setting off to retrieve the stashed gear from the Bevan Col and then would continue up the South west side of the glacier, our exact route yet undetermined as none of us had tried this route before.

I cannot remember if we carried any of Nick Fly's extra load for him. Details are hazy at this point as I was also pretty exhausted after a long day myself. I remember that Ben was out in front trying to establish a safe route, to avoid the worst of the glacial terrain we had to go up and over Mt Joffre [map note 8]. I also remember that Nick D made a comment about not being happy with the situation of us being so spread out at this point of the late day. I was struggling to maintain visual contact with Ben out in front of me and Nick D





behind me. I had not had sight of Nick Fly for sometime who was somewhere behind Nick D.

Ben found a route down the other side of Mt Joffre and back down on to the glacier. It was soon clear that we were not going to make it through the Quarterdeck Pass before dark so we were no longer in a rush. Just before dark Ben stopped somewhere near the base of Mt French, about 2 km from Quarterdeck Pass, to allow us four to group up. When Nick Fly finally arrived it was fully dark and we were all under head torch. Nick Fly immediately announced he could go no further and that he was bivvying down right where we stood. I think there was a little deliberation while Nick D and Ben tried to persuade Nick Fly to carry on to the hut but he was going no further and made it clear that he also thought it was a bad idea to try to navigate through that terrain at night. Nick Fly had got seriously lost in that same area at night back in 1995.

Meanwhile, Mike and Sven were waiting at Quarter Deck pass and could see the lights of our head torches. They too were not keen to descend to through the Quarter Deck and negotiate the steep glacial terrain in the dark so they skied back down the glacier to us. All six of us were back together in the middle of the Bonar Glacier half way between each of the huts. For the four who had planned to traverse the Snow Drift Range this was simple, they bivvy down right there, they had gear to sleep outside in low negative temperatures. For Mike and I, we had not planned on any nights out in the open we did not have such gear. But at this point we had no choice.

It was brutally cold with a gentle but piecing wind flowing down the glacier. Lucky for us the weather was clear and stable. We tried to dig in and create a wind barrier behind our heads but the snow was solid. Sven

at this stage was silent, sitting motionless with his head hanging between his knees unable to help dig or do anything, it was clear he was not in a good way. Nick Fly also seemed to have similar but less severe symptoms.

The shallow hole we dug with the small wind wall helped a little but it was clear that Mike and I were going to have a very cold night. We both had no sleeping mat or bivvy bag and my sleeping bag was only rated to negative four, that night must have been near negative 20. Nick Fly had a spare thin foam mat that I used on top of my upside down skis, Mike slept on a coiled rope on top of four upside down skis. I wore everything I had including ski boot liners then used my jacket as a bivvy bag zipped up around the outside of my sleeping bag. I was still bone cold.

A system was setup to boil water on mass for everyone's freeze dried meals but it was super slow with the wind, altitude and cold temps. I'm not sure if Sven was able to make his own meal but he was not able to keep it down. In a savage twist of fate he vomited onto Nick Fly's sleeping bag, who was also feeling sick. The sickest guy of the group, who desperately needed food and energy threw up what little he managed to eat right on to the next sickest guys sleeping bag! I remember feeling so sorry for the both of them. Sven was trying his best to apologise but he could barely speak, Nick was doing his best to clean up spew from his sleeping bag while he was feeling sick himself. The one saving grace was it was so cold that the vomit froze quickly so it could be partially brushed off as chunky ice.

That was a very long night. I did not sleep a wink due to the shivering cold. A night seems like a week when you lie quivering waiting for the warm sunrays of the next day. The only consolation was the beautiful deep dark alpine night sky with more stars than I had

ever seen before. I was briefly able to get lost in weird thought while watching satellites and shooting stars before snapping back to reality of how fucking cold I was all the way to the bone! It just never seemed to get light but seemed to get colder and colder. I have never been that cold before and don't intend to be again.

The dawn did eventually come. At the first hint of morning glow we were up and out of there, over Quarterdeck Pass and descended down to the French Ridge hut for a breaky of hot porridge where I finally warmed up. By this time Sven and Nick Fly had also recovered so after a short rest and a few more hot teas and coffees we descended 1000m through native bush into warm spring weather and a wee dip in the Matukituki river. From there it was just a flat twelve km slog to Raspberry Flat where our cars and proper rest were waiting.

Although this trip scared me, nearly to death, and I suffered the longest, coldest night of my life I enjoyed this trip as one of the best I have done. I also learnt a lot in those 3 days. I had a steep learning curve about what gear I need on a trip like that, I learnt more about how to use and apply that gear and I learnt how to calm my nerves when they are literally sending me over the edge. But I learnt the most about group dynamics. I believe the size of this group was the main cause of things going a little off plan but the collective knowledge, experience and level-headed demeanour of the individuals in this group is what kept it incident free. I didn't really know any of these guys before heading on this trip with them, but I was lucky that they were of the calibre that they are.

I will probably not attempt a trip like that with a group that size again, but I would gladly go back into the hills with any one of those lads with whom I shared that epic adventure.