

David

BY FRAN POTHECARY

We first met David at an Alpine Club Climbing Camp. Although wary of the Hi-de-Hi! sitcom overtones that a ‘camp’ implied, Kath and I figured that with our singular lack of knowledge of the Southern Alps it would be an ideal opportunity to network with other climbers and select some easy first routes.

A pattern of late spring weather had established itself in the mountains, frustrating sorties onto the upper slopes and providing ample opportunity for networking. My mood reflected the weather. Adjusting to bereavement is like the prospect of summer weather—a slowly improving outlook punctuated by occasional, short-lived depressions. Nevertheless, a brew in hand from the ever-boiling billy, we circulated, thirsty for information.

I don’t remember when I first became aware of David but it seemed that there was never a conversation that he wasn’t on the fringes of. He was in his 40s, intense, fit looking and I was impressed when he said he wanted to have a go at the traverse of Mt Avalanche and Rob Roy, a massive undertaking of icefalls, loose rock and difficult route finding even to my untutored eye. But he seemed keen to do an easy peak as a three so I offered him to join our rope on Mt French. His insistence on packing pitons and nuts threw me—the route appeared to be a Grade 1 glacier plod. I was left on the horns of a familiar dilemma—whether to accede to local, though unproven, knowledge or go with my gut instinct of what I could expect from a route of that length and grade. I mused on this as I went to sort my gear. In the event, the weather window stayed firmly shut and instead, Kath and I blew out of the valley, burdened with our remaining five days worth of food, bent double like Himalayan porters.

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A week later, a small group of refugees reconvened further north at the Unwin Hut. The air was thick with stories, embellished with hand gestures and it was a comfort to be back in the encompassing sweep of mountains after the melancholy ‘badlands’ of Central Otago.

David was there too, on the fringes, forever rummaging through the fridge or peering into supermarket carrier bags for outdated food.

Custom dictated that hut residents named and dated their food and it was something respected, unlike the student halls of residence that I had ever lived in. The student in David was strong.

‘Look, the date on this bag says the 14th,’ he would say, ‘it’s out-of-date’.

Someone explained to him that the climbers labelled their bags by their arrival date, not the expiry date of the food.

‘Oi, piss off,’ said Geordie Alan, rather more succinctly, grabbing a milk carton from his hands.

But David was undeterred and I never saw him eat any of his own food in that time.

‘What do you think?’ he said to me one morning lifting a huge Macpac by the straps, the pale skin of his underarms catching the sun. He was planning an overnight tramp over Ball Pass.

‘Looks huge,’ I said neutrally, ‘How much food are you carrying?’

‘Three days worth ...’

I raised my eyebrows.

‘... There’s a spare day for if I run into trouble.’

It looked unlikely that he would run anywhere with that on his back.

Two axes and a shovel, a snow stake and rope topped off the immense load. Having seen three inexperienced Germans in bendy boots and single long axes over the Pass earlier in the week, the load seemed more a liability than an asset.

He came back off the hill late the next day and we greeted him effusively, guiltily. He had missed the Pass altogether as he had lost his way once the sporadic cairns had petered out, and had somehow found his way down onto the moraine. Of all the laminated A5 bits of maps he showed, us none had the Pass itself on it. There was even a topographical overview of the whole of the Mount Cook range and a page torn from a travel atlas. It was a startling insight into his mind.

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At about midnight, Kath and I were woken by someone pushing open the door to the bivvy hut, and then closing it again. I went outside. It was pitch black except for the lights of the village 1000 metres below. There was no wind and the air was mild. A feathery swoop over my head heralded the kea on night-watch for a carelessly left backpack. A climber was taking water from the rain-fed tank. He looked up and in

the weak light of the head-torch, I recognised the young Swedish guide who had been staying at the Unwin Hut.

‘We can shove up if you want space to sleep,’ I said, ‘it’ll be cosy but there’s enough room.’

He smiled, a slow unhurried smile so like Mark’s that one of the small birds of sorrow on my shoulder lifted momentarily, as if he was standing before me.

‘Thanks but I am going to have some food, and then I’ll be going on.’

‘Up the Footstool?’ I queried. He nodded. ‘We met two guys who did it yesterday—said it was soft going’

I didn’t add that one of them had slipped and fallen and that his axe couldn’t get any purchase in the mush. Only his crampons catching stopped him. Back at the hut, the two lads had walked tenderly on their blistered feet, and had that 1000-yard stare that comes with a big, scary day out.

Jan had been at the Plateau Hut for a week waiting for an elusive weather window for his third attempt at Aoraki. It had been a long period of contemplative boredom interspersed by a painstaking gripping episode on the Linda Glacier, but he was phlegmatic.

‘She’ll always be there,’ he grinned ironically at his own cliché. ‘So a quick scoot up and down this one—he nodded upwards at the Footstool—‘then I have a plane to catch’.

With deft, economical movements he unpacked a small stove and the blur of a gas flame picked out shadows in the darkness. Without asking he filled my mug with a strong black tea. We talked of the Scandinavian mountains, of the fiercely inhospitable winter of the Hardangervidda and the ski routes connecting valleys and huts. My mind drifted to the communal work of chopping wood and melting snow, and the unending hilarity of trying to master cross country skis. I said nothing of my own sorrow, but despite his focus as he packed to leave, he momentarily squeezed my fingers. It was a gesture of such wordless understanding I felt tears prickle behind my lashes.

The keas were back in force at first light. I stared up at the sloping wooden eaves, seeing the patch of old hessian wallpaper from the original bivvy and listening to the birds as they attempted to dismantle the radio antennae and peel back the corrugated tin roof with their powerful beaks. I thought of Mark and wished I could press a big red

fast forward button into the future, where the pain was a memory rather than a physical presence. I took the stove, some coffee and the tobacco and found a sheltered niche overlooking the glacier, watching the sunrise on the face. As I smoked, I watched the newly etched footprints take shape and meld under the sun's rays. They led away in a confident logical line, on a level shelf between the bands of seracs. Just before the safety of the col, a fresh sluff cut across them, dropping over the steep face below. As hard as I looked I couldn't see the footprints on the other side. I looked so long that my eyes started playing tricks, rocks moving and taking the shape of hunched over, exhausted but determined climbers, thinking only of a safe return and a brew. Kath was next up, neat and doll-like. Sipping Hummingbird we studied the face together and she was silent, a warm breeze lifting the short fringe off her forehead.

'I think we should radio down to DOC,' she said finally.

We stayed up there for hours, reading the hut book and surreptitiously feeding the keas. A helicopter overhead began a sweep search of the area, focusing on the bands of crevasses below the sluff. We watched its tiny outline lower someone with a stretcher into a slot. The radio in the hut crackled occasionally. The chopper flew away bearing an extra burden and didn't return.

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Back at the Hut, the warden asked me to clear Jan's stuff, simply because I had been the last person to talk to him. I packed clothes and personal effects, the sleeping bag that bore the imprint of recent evacuation and left in full expectation of return. I found a small bundle of well-thumbed photos—a dog, an older couple with a striking resemblance to Jan and a woman and small child grinning up from a sled, wrapped in fleeces.

David saw me just as I was coming out of the bunkroom. He had somehow secured a shoulder massage from a young Israeli traveller. He looked at the packages in my hands and his eyes lit up 'Hey—do you think he left any food?' I just looked at him and walked out.