

BOLD BEYOND BELIEF – book review

Bill Denz - New Zealand's Mountain Warrior

by Paul Maxim

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Review by Paul Hersey (issue 78, summer 2011/2012)

I found it rather ironic that I was asked to review a book about one of our climbing legends at the same time as working on an article extolling the virtues of our climbers of the present. It was like I was being tested on my facts or reminded of the toughness and bloody-mindedness that shaped much of our mountaineering history. 'Tread carefully through these hallowed annals' seemed to be the message.

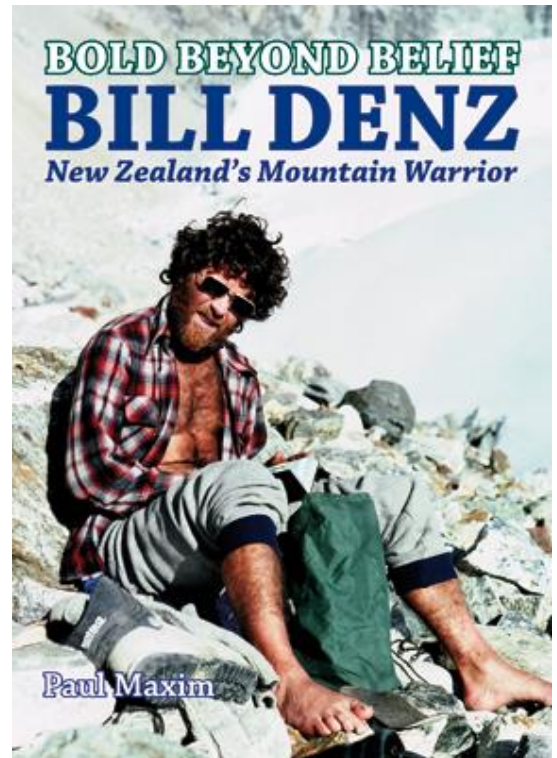
Most climbing enthusiasts—armchair or otherwise—would agree that Bill Denz was one of our highest achieving alpinists. Before his death on Makalu in 1983, Denz had literally bludgeoned his way into climbing folklore, both here and overseas. Blunt to the point of being obnoxious, stubborn to the point of being pig-headed, Denz usually had one way of doing things—his way! Most people I've spoken to over the years agreed that Denz was a 'bloody good climber,' but that he could be 'bloody difficult' to get on with.

A book on Denz has been long overdue and I was stoked to get the opportunity to review *Bold Beyond Belief: Bill Denz, New Zealand's Mountain Warrior*. Yet I didn't actually get a copy of it to review. Apparently, the book was still at the printers and in the rush to get a review in this issue of *The Climber*, I was given a final printing draft copied onto A4 paper along with a colour photocopy of the wrap. So, I can't comment on the final look or 'feel' of the book.

I was interested to see how Wellington author Paul Maxim tackled this project. Paul's previous two books, a family biography and an archival delve into Wellington aviation history, could be described as rather dry topics, whereas the Denz legacy is full of colour, grit and healthy characterisation. It quickly became apparent that *Bold Beyond Belief* has been thoroughly researched. It is jammed with information, quotes and anecdotes. After a foreword by Greg Child (who never had that much to do with Denz but did write about him and is a famous author) and an introduction by Paul, each of the 14 chapters starts with either a quote or a short description of a particular climb or event.

It seems most of Denz's climbs have been referred to: from his formative years at Aoraki Mount Cook and the Darrans through to the big walls in Yosemite, on to Alaska, South America and the Himalaya. What surprised me was Denz's methodical approach to higher and harder climbing. Early on in the book, Paul picks up on the fact that 'not only did Denz want to be the best climber of his day, he wanted to be the best that New Zealand had ever produced'. I was also pleasantly surprised to see that Denz stuck his neck out for women climbing, criticising the Canterbury Mountaineering Club for not allowing female members and trying to get the club to change its policy. The hardened climber also had a sense for what was right.

I'm not sure if it was deliberate, but Paul's language usage is in what I would define as the classic mountaineering style, almost to the point of being swashbuckling. Phrases like 'an uncut jewel for all to see from the lofty surrounds,' 'the boldness of the line and the dashing style of its execution,' and 'victory was theirs,' could be considered a bit cliché in modern literature terms. I acknowledge that Paul, either by choice or necessity, has gone with self-publishing the book. This brings about its own set of challenges in the editing process.



There are plenty of gritty moments, and Paul has depicted these well. From my perception, Denz was someone who surrounded himself with the best climbers he could muster, and then went for the gnarliest line he could find. Paul has captured the tenacity within these climbing relationships by using extended quotes from others, along with Denz's own writing. Black and white photos are spaced throughout the work, along with a selection of colour prints in the middle. At the end of the book, there is a section of obituaries and tributes, along with a list of Denz's climbs.

This book is less a critical assessment of Denz and more an extended memorial towards him. As Paul writes in the introduction, 'this book details the life of a most extraordinary New Zealander who touched the lives of so many people and inspired a whole new generation of mountaineers, amongst them yours truly. It is my hope that this work captures the essence and greatness of this remarkable New Zealander, Bill Denz.' Personally, I would have enjoyed more of the former, but it proved an interesting and worthwhile read all the same.