

Mawson Peak Summit Log (#14291)

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- **Signed By:** 1999/2000 Australian Army Alpine Association Heard Island Expedition of Sydney, NSW, Australia
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The long (but well worth reading) saga is as follows.....

ëThe Captain's Route' Mawson Peak, Heard Island Nov 99- Jan 00

By Tim Curtis

Expedition Team Members- Robb Clifton, Matt Rogerson, Stu Davies and Tim Curtis

Heard Island is a world heritage listed, sub-Antarctic volcanic island rising from the Kerguelen Plateau in the southern ocean. Some travel agents have decreed Heard Island as being the most isolated place on earth. The 390 square kilometre island is home to Mawson Peak which, at 2745metres, is Australia's highest peak. 80% of the island is glaciated, with its mean annual temperature being +1degree Celsius. ëBig Ben' last erupted in 1992 and has been climbed on two previous occasions in 1964 and 1983. Its position, some 4500 kilometres south- west of Perth made accessing the island possible only by chartered ship or fishing vessel. The later was the 1999/2000 Heard Island Expedition's preferred method of insertion. This is the storyÖÖ.

Snuggled down in the depths of a 1000g down bag cowering in fear against the wind, spindrift and rain (!!) pelting the Sierra Dome I could hear movement outside as Robb and/ or Stu frantically wielded snow shovels in order to save their North Face from being completely destroyed by the prevailing westerly winds onto Heard Island's west coast. At approximately 1430metres, Camp 1 was shielded to the east by a huge ice cliff but perched atop a westerly facing snow slope. Having set up in a complete ëwhite out', we were all a little unsure, not to mention curious, to see where the run-out on the snow slope ended. Glancing at Matt's equally comfortable body in his sleeping bag I yelled out to Robb and Stu, iAre you guys still outside?î. Looking at the rapid build up of spindrift I was hoping the reply was ëYes'. ëJust', came back Robb's reply. ëCan you guys throw a shovel at the spindrift alongside our tent?', I pleaded, endeavoring not to sound like the lazy bastard that I was. The sound of shovel against the vestibule was music to Matt's and my ears as we continued to lie tucked up under layers of down. I decided to stretch the 12 year old friendshipÖ, iHey CliffoÖ.when you're finished there can you take a couple of shovel loads off the head of the tent?î. The traverse along the western side of the tent had been simple given the earlier soft snow conditions but unbeknown to us the cold freeze had iced the snow slope. As

I chatted to Cliffo through the nylon I heard the unmistakable noise of 'Clifton's ass' hitting ice and the dreaded sound of 'Clifton' moving downslope at high velocity. This was going to be a quick way of checking what was at the end of the snow slope run-out. Matt and I both sprung out of bivvy bags concurrently with Stu yelling to Robb, 'Anchor yourself!!!!'. Matt's arrival outside also delivered Robb some words of encouragement, 'Pick up your snow stake while your down there, you bastard!!'- re an earlier loss of gear down the slope. Matt's yells to me for the video camera confirmed that my med kit was not needed. Amazingly Robb had slipped on the slope and armed only with snow shovel had the rest of his life to self-arrest. His fall was 150 metres and was undoubtedly the start on what was declared by a later hastily convened sub- committee of the epics board as 'AN EPIC TRIP'. He also lost the shovel!

MAWSON PEAK started for the four of us in mid November with a flight to Mauritius. The scope of the trip was to link up with the Austral Fisheries, Fishing Vessel SOUTHERN CHAMPION in Port Louis, enabling a sea ride south to Heard Island, a drop off in our zodiacs and enough time for us to climb Mawson Peak and return back to link up with SOUTHERN CHAMPION for the return voyage to Albany. The 10 days preceding our departure from Mauritius were spent in a beach house in Grand Baie. The sub Antarctic acclimatisation programme was punctuated only by the rattle of ice in 'G and T's' and numerous experiences of 'delicious Mauritius' (the food, not the nightlife!). The four of us were augmented by Emma, Robb's 'girlfriend' (don't say 'that word', man!), who ensured that Robb's manners were maintained for at least the initial part of the trip. Mauritius did provide some good opportunities for us to openly discuss our expectations for the expedition and importantly our 'wafer thin' medical and casualty evacuation plan. As the team medic (no experience but I'll check it out for you) it was my responsibility to devise this and in essence it was spelt out something like, 'Start taking the pain early and we'll try to sled haul you off the mountain in your bivvy bag. You'll get a few handfuls of Panadeine Fortes though so you should be right. And in about 10 days time we should have you in a hospital! Any questions?'

We sailed from Mauritius on 2 December, with our passage down south having been spelt out clearly for us when our names appeared on the ships shift rosters. Stu was able to punctuate his thoughts on sea travel early in the voyage by vomiting directly into my face as I, being the sympathetic medic, was checking on his sea sickness!! The SOUTHERN CHAMPION used an opportunity early to fish the Indian Ocean, which saw us fitted for steel capped gum boots, aprons and extra strength rubber gloves and eased into the 'factory' for an 8 hours on, 8 hours off shift arrangement. To paint the picture further the SOUTHERN CHAMPION is Australia's largest offshore trawler and is fully self contained. The fish are netted, processed, packed, snap frozen and then stored all on board. It is amazing how the days pass when you work 16 hours each of them!! With much delight in 70 and 80 ton 'bags' of fish that guaranteed another 4 days straight packing fish in the factory our thoughts of an early landing on HI became more remote. By Christmas day, mutiny was on all of our lips. The 'eau de fish' had gone sub surface on skin and made for a fantastic nights sleep, not to mention

the wonderful aroma of discarded clothes after an 8 hours on'. With the crew very sympathetic to our plight as 'work for passage' sea riders, there was very little that we could do save tuck into a fantastic Christmas dinner, drown our sorrow in the two issued Mauritian beers (a rip off 330ml!!) and secretly conduct those prayers for 'no more fish', in our cabin in the lower decks. Fortunately after many sessions 'on bended knee' (amazingly religion returned to most of us very quickly!), there was a lull in the catching of 'Orange Roughy' in the Indian Ocean and the skipper made the decision to head south. After experiencing the best that the 'roaring forties' had to offer we finally 'dropped pick' in Atlas Roads off Heard Island in the early morning of 1 January 00. A still and becalmed HI greeted us with, what we were soon to find out was normal, socked in cloud conditions. The zodiacs tripped the 1 mile into Atlas Cove giving us all our first glimpse of this unbelievable wilderness. Southern Elephant Seals, Fur Seals, King and Gentoo Penguins were lining Walrus Beach, all somewhat bemused by these two little boats invading their privacy. Skuas and Kelp Gulls provided the overhead entertainment with all the wildlife keen to close up to the team for a closer look. Glad to find that our expectation of a horrendous beach break in Atlas Cove was unfounded, we commenced the portage of our ton of equipment up to the remnants of the 1947-1955 Australian National Antarctic Research Expedition (ANARE) huts. The weather has taken its toll on the old huts, many being completely destroyed or inhabited by 500 kg elephant seals that I wasn't prepared to make homeless. After deciding on sharing house with a couple of the much smaller and more placid sheathbills we stored our boats in the least damaged hut and after our first dehydrated meal established our tent site on ready made duck boarding some distance from the belching elephant seals and skua shit. I noted the falling barometer on my G- Shock at around midnight that night, but as the night was still (save those bloody elephant seals!) I rolled over and went back to sleep (a well established team SOP). The deafening roar of an easterly woke Stu and I later that morning, supported by rain. We were about to experience lesson number one on HI: That you can never be complacent or predict HI weather. The winds rose and by dawn we surveyed the damage to our tents, both of which sported snapped poles and tears in the fly. A tough lesson learnt early that now meant we had on 2 tents to carry onto the mountain with us- a factor that nearly prevented us summitting some 7 days later. A quick council of war agreed that we should not risk any damage to more tents, but rather relocation inside a hut was our best course of action- despite the thick muddy floor and mixed in bird droppings that seemed to cover bivvy bags no matter how well you tried to protect yourself from it!

2nd January was a load carry and route finding day to locate and establish our first cache for Advanced Base Camp (ABC). Defined, ABC was to be sited at that highest point below the need to 'rope up' for glacier travel. This was to be our first experience of the variety of wildlife and extraordinary scenery, terrain and vegetation that HI had to offer. Our route took us 7kms coastal along black sand beaches inhabited by rockhopper, macaroni and king penguins and the mandatory elephant seals. Amazingly, glaciers ran into the sea. In places the terminal aspect of the glaciers offered huge ice cliffs that were all but impassable

from the coast. As we sat some hours into our carry and contemplated our next stretch of coast onto which 'Big Wednesday' crunched directly into the base of 40-50metre high ice cliffs, the decision was made that our period of coasting had drawn to a close and it was time to tackle some of the more unsavoury lateral moraine. This proved easier than originally thought giving us passage onto the Vahsel and Alison Glaciers. Both were firm and after 'cramponing up' we stomped up to later site ABC alongside a sizeable chunk of moraine. The return trip was more pleasant given lighter packs and a more direct route traversing the Vahsel and Alison again, across the, soon to be known as 'torturous', Pageous Moraine, then the, aptly named, Nullarbor Plain back into Atlas Cove and home sweet home amongst the bird, penguin and seal shit.

The next day offered an opportunity to complete our carry and occupy ABC in preparation for the ascent of the Abbotsmith Glacier. Another carry was achieved in good time. As we reflected on the plan for the following day we noted the absence of a stove pump for the second stove. No redundancy was not a good thing, and with logistics firmly driving the 4th January, Robb and Stu descended to pick up the stove part whilst Matt and I lay in our sleeping bags drinking brews all day. Umm I mean we conducted a carry of rations and fuel and route finding up the Abbotsmith Glacier laying the Mauritian cut bamboo marker wands as we went. With good visibility Matt was happy with our progress along the Abbotsmith, and much amused by my early falls into, what I would describe as 'heavily concealed', crevasses. As the 'junior member' of the team I bided my time and it was not too long before Matt completed the team's first face-plant into a slot. Being more sympathetic than my rope buddy, however, I did not return his earlier conduct of flashing camera and whirring video! Robb and Stu were already at ABC by the time we returned, and with the now mandatory pay outs regarding both the missing stove pump and Matt and my 'oxygen carry' higher the day concluded.

If we hadn't learnt our weather lesson earlier we did on the 5th of January as white out conditions forced us to miss our 'turn-wand' to ascend the glacier. It was a day of reliance on the Garmin GPS, which proved invaluable throughout the trip given the necessity for poor visibility climbing. The cache site that Matt and I had laid the day previously could not be found even though the GPS indicated that we were standing on it. With Stu being the lightest member of the team we swung him around on the end of the 9mm rope until, after 30 minutes of looking, he (aka 'the blind leading the blind') collided with the cache marker wands. After another short period of praise for the GPS, we lifted the cache and continued the climb until arriving at the ice cliff (1430m)- the site of the aforementioned Robb Clifton fall.

Which brings me back to now. So where was I???? Camp 1 having been established against the ice wall provided good protection against the easterlies but unbeknown to us a reentrant down the glacier acted as a wind tunnel for the westerlies. The tents were consistently subjected to high winds and being battered by spindrift. Despite poor visibility we packed Camp 1 and attempted to

climb to around 2000metres the next day (6th). After a short vertical ascent involving a couple of technical pitches to around 1700metres, Robb screamed down over the winds that he had topped out at near vertical ice cliffs and was coming down. Our next quick council of war convened and all being in agreement that further climbing with packs, in white out conditions, on near vertical snow and ice slopes was futile we returned and re established Camp 1. At midnight that night the weather opened enough to offer Matt and Stu the opportunity to climb and recce a northerly approach. As they came back the backdrop of the sunset at midnight, over a lower cloud base had us all in awe at the island's magnificence. We hoped for a clearer following day.

Which we got!! In the best conditions we had experienced thus far, and having learnt our 'route finding with packs on' lesson, we set off to route find south and approach around the ice cliffs we had run into the previous day. This took us off the Abbotsmith Glacier and onto an unnamed (we are attempting to re-badge as the 'Happy Wanderer') glacier that offered some good routes through some amazing ice sculptures and falls. Several hours into the route finding, with seemingly the world stretched at our feet above the cloud cover, we noted our footprints of yesterday that trekked precariously close to a sheer drop off an ice cliff shielded by the poor viz. I remarked to Matt that climbing in white-outs was preferable for me to the exposure of yesterday's climb. The upward ascent of the HW Glacier offered, at 1760metres, our first summit view. It was a moment that took our breath away. The summit was silhouetted on the skyline with what looked to be lenticular cloud racing over it (later found out to be sulphur gas). The 'hogbacks' on surrounding ridgelines were fascinating. It was a high point in the expedition to date and motivated us by showing that HI could offer good climbing conditions and Mother Nature being kind enough to show us the summit. As we stood in awe of the magnificence of this wild mountain, Matt aptly summed up all of our thoughts, 'Even if we don't get up', it has been made worthwhile by this one day.

The 8th offered a 'normal' HI day- white out conditions! After a night of rain (!) that saturated Robb and Stu's North Face tent making life for them miserable, we packed Camp 1 for the second time and following our marker wands and GPS spots retraced our steps from the previous day. The rain had softened the snow and, whilst our tracks were easy to follow, they led us over now dangerous snow bridges which collapsed with monotonous regularity. The fall of the day was awarded to Stu, who although being 70kg (wringing wet!) managed to collapse a snow bridge, shock load the rope and commence dragging Robb (85kg in the shade!) upslope towards the slot! After climbing through our previous day's high point we continued on compass bearings towards the summit (again oblivious to our earlier lessons of packs on in white-out conditions!). At 1960metres we ran aground onto a small snow ledge, which was decided would be the location of Camp 2. Whilst Robb and I pitched tents, Matt and Stu climbed on to recce a route for, what was hoped to be, our summit day tomorrow. After returning with little more promising route news we settled into our tents for another cold and windy night.

Robb and Stu's earlier rainy experience has made life in their tent uncomfortable given wet sleeping bags and bivvy bags. The high overnight winds made sleep almost impossible, with us regularly yelling out over the wind continuing with 'morale lifting' payouts on each other. By early morning it had become apparent that Robb and Stu's physical well being was in danger if we continued to expose them to the continued cold given their wet gear. Both still being keen to climb on for the summit we prepared to set out. It soon became apparent that it was to be no easy task. Wet Gore-Tex outer garments that had been stored inside tents overnight froze solid after only two minutes outside. Plastic boot laces were frozen, thus preventing a snug fit on feet. The ropes were rigid and harnesses straight out of the freezer. Ice had to be chipped from karabiners in order to fit ropes and prussiks. Stomping feet was a full time occupation to keep toes warm despite both a thermal and extreme cold weather layer of socks. The wind from the west was bitterly cold requiring us to wear every piece of clothing we had. I had little confidence in my ability to competently use my ice axe given that the cold axe head meant that my fingers froze (despite three layers of gloves/ mitts) through my (just) holding the axe. Shifting the axe from hand to hand continuously provided the only relief. With Robb and Stu still suiting up, and Matt and I too cold to wait, we started the climb following Matt and Stu's steps of the previous day's recce. With my mind sponsoring some bizarre morbid thoughts that climbers should not think whilst ascending, I could follow only the direction that the rope disappeared to into the white. Somewhere past that Matt was peering a metre in front of him to try and make out his 12 hour old footprints. No sign of Stu and Robb behind us. They had started the climb then aborted it, each hoping that Matt and I would do the same. When Matt stopped at the end of yesterday's footprints I closed up to him and recalling the words of Shackleton to his wife on his turning around from the South Pole ('I thought you'd rather have a live donkey than a dead lion'), started questioning Matt on the reasons why we should continue given the conditions on the mountain. Listening to myself at the time I was disgusted with how I sounded thinking that perhaps I was taking the easy way out...after all I could just follow the rope. In any case I had confidence in the decision that Matt would make either way. His decision was to descend. Sensing the reluctance and disappointment in his voice made me only feel worse as I strained to pick up the crampon pricks in the ice that we had made coming up. We met Robb and Stu outside their tent stripping off technical gear. 'Not today my friend', Robb said to me, 'Not today'.

After surveying our meagre supplies which consisted of a 1/3 bottle of fuel and a small packet of rice from a ration pack each we collectively decided that tomorrow was make or break for us. Good conditions would mean another opportunity to summit, whilst bad conditions would necessitate us descending and (hopefully) priming back up for another effort on the mountain. Dozing off I was woken by Robb asking me for my emergency blanket. Handing it through to him he described his tent as being super-saturated. Not thinking too much of it at this stage I dozed off again to be woken by Robb asking, 'Is there any room for me in your tent?'. Instantly my medical alarm bells started ringing. I had known Robb for many years and knew that such a request would have to be really meant.

Instantly both Matt and I yelled, 'Yes mate', and opened the tent vestibule for Robb to come in. He was a sight- wearing all of his clothes, a pair of Gore-Tex inner mitts on his feet and his toes stuck into the 'liners' from his plastic boots. Once we got him inside I had a good look, out of sheer morbid curiosity, at his pained face. I subsequently thought to myself that this was what a dead man must look like. Not expressing these thoughts to Robb, Matt and I grabbed a leg each and plunged it into our respective sleeping bags. Robb claimed that he had little sensation in his toes and instantly we started worked to improve the circulation to his feet. In true Clifton style he berated me on several occasions as Matt was warming his left foot better than I was his right! With Stu sounding happy enough on his own in the other tent I settled down for an intimate night with Robb Clifton in my sleeping bag. We transferred him wholly into my bag where I think we both agree we spent an uncomfortable night, with me pitying Emma having to endure him on regular occasions! It was a sleepless night of the two of us synchronising roll-overs to keep from seizing up into an eternal 'spoon' position. Checking the barometer and providing regular team updates showed the barometer was rising. We prayed for a fine day and not a repeat of the horrendous conditions of yesterday.

At 0530hours Stu yelled across that he could see the cloud base below us. Matt bounded outside and with a whoop, proclaimed that the sun was just coming up on the other side of Mawson Peak on a CLEAR DAY! The joy of pulling on still frozen gear was compensated for me by two things: a clear day providing a good summit opportunity, and more importantly getting out of that sleeping bag with Clifton! Outside the temperature could again be described as 'cold'. My thermometer later indicated -15 degrees C, less wind chill. My rough uneducated estimate was -20C at least. Cracking on so as not to cool down too much we climbed through some spectacular volcanic vents that spouted sulphur gases. Once again the world seemed beneath us, the sun rising on the opposite side of the mountain provided an incredible silhouette of Big Ben against the western skyline. Stu's little whippet nature carried him to doing the majority of the route finding whilst Matt (once again) filmed video tirelessly. It was all that I could do to keep my mind on climbing. Oh shangdanged!! In two hours we topped out onto nothingness. The summit at 2745metres!

Our exhilaration was compounded by the views down to the coast and our experiences of the previous day. The summit cone was mainly snowed over leaving a summit vent of perhaps 10 metres in diameter. From this vent was billowing sulphur that made standing on the summit unbearable. Amidst much coughing, dry retching, and stinging eyes we took the mandatory series of photos and video and retired to the lee side where the sulphur was less potent. It was there that Cliffo produced 'the summit rum'. A potent concoction of Mauritian blend 'Spice Island Rum' that mixed well with the sulphur fumes!! Not 24 hours previously I think we had all thought that perhaps this mountain was not to be climbed by us, but with some divine intervention and the will of old Mother Nature we had become the third party to successfully summit Mawson Peak.

Clearing completely off the hill was achieved in the great visibility of that day. It was unreal to think of the white out and freezing conditions of the previous days when climbing in blazing sunshine. Whilst the 3000 odd metre vertical descent and 20 kilometre horizontal stomp all the way back to Base Camp, Atlas Cove, was trying for us all given the previous day it was worth while given the best thing for morale was, as espoused by all good Army instructors, 'A hot brew lad! That'll switch ya back on!'.

The expedition was unsurpassed in providing, for each of us, some extreme life challenges and rewards. Heard Island provided an incredible environment for wilderness experiences that has been made all the better by ice axes not having to be wielded intra- team. The opportunity to visit such a diverse and remote location on earth should not be passed up by anyone given any distant chance. The four of us were in agreeance that Heard is one of the most beautiful places on the earth and one that we would all return to in an instant.

Some hard learnt lessons for anyone contemplating a future HI 'mission': 1. The two days of good viz in 10 days made navigation and route finding in white-out conditions a necessary evil. We could never have achieved success in this without our two GPS. If we had to attribute (technologically) success somewhere it would have to be here! 2. Without the luxury of weather reports, the barometer on our Casio G- Shock 'Alti-thermo' became better watching than the evening news. We were reliant on its rise and fall for planning our next move. 3. The weather is changeable, and quickly! 4. Isolation climbing requires a collective risk assessment that is agreed upon by all team members. Our fortune was in a developed trust and understanding amongst the team on injuries and illness whilst on the mountain given our distance from surgical facilities. 5. Mauritian bamboo wands, used to mark a safe climbing route, when exposed to high winds, rain, snow and freezing conditions, DO NOT!

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