

Seven Nights in the Snow

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[The writer was reprimanded by the Ski Council of N.S.W. for undertaking this solitary trip, with grave risk to himself and possibly others. How nearly fatal were the consequences appears from his account and no further warning should be necessary to dissuade others from making a like attempt, alone and unannounced.—Editor.]

I have been asked to write the following account of my experiences, on a trip from Alpine Hut to the Chalet in late August 1945.

Foolish as my lone trip may perhaps seem, there are some extenuating circumstances. In the first place the weather in late August is usually good and it was my misfortune to strike freak bad weather. Secondly I had a very good knowledge of the terrain and although, being abroad, I had not seen the Main Range for some twelve years, I yet felt quite confident, especially as I had done some overland ski-ing in Austria and Germany. Thirdly, I was thoroughly equipped, prepared to camp anywhere in the snowland, under any weather conditions.

I had intended starting from Kiandra and following the crest of the range to Jargungal and thence to the Chalet. However, the snow was fast thawing, so I continued on to Adaminaby by car. Fortunately here I re-packed my rucksack, and forwarded by post some surplus clothes, putting in their place bread, butter, cheese, and a handful of dates along with some small bars of chocolate, to implement the cooked beef, Vita Brits, powdered milk, sugar, tea, cocoa, bacon and eggs, that I carried. After lunch the mail man ran me out to the Eucumbene River bridge and tramping on towards the Alpine Hut, I settled for the night in an empty drover's hut on the swampy plain. Next day, at the Brassy Gap, I was able to buckle on the ski, with some relief, and was soon at the Alpine Hut, nestling in good deep snow.

Here I was made most welcome, and after a hearty breakfast next morning, set out on the last lap. The weather had been bad for some days, but knowing the way well from Finn's River on, and visibility being fair, I had decided to set out, with the intention, if the weather worsened, of staying the night at Pounds hut.

Climbing on to the top of the range near the Big Brassy, the pelting snow and rising gale not only knocked me over, but unfortunately catching me with goggles down, injured the cornea of my eyes, which there-

after smarted and wept continuously so that I was half blind. With the wind howling at my back, I swept over Finn's River plain, past the Tin Hut, dimly discerable through the driving snow. Caution dictated stopping here but the wind being in the general line of my course, I pressed on, rapidly mounting towards Gungartan. The going was erratic and somewhat rough as all loose snow had been blown off, exposing large sheets of wind swept ice. This proved hard to negotiate on the further side of the mountain, the timber edge of the ski making no impression on the icy crust, while the strong thrust of the following wind swept me down at breakneck speed, making checking extremely difficult and causing some inevitable heavy falls.

However, once across the saddle, and in the lee of the storm, the snow was excellent, and I kept on the undulating plateau south of White's until the Snowy River Gorge hove in sight. Following along the high ground, I crossed on a snow bridge, just below the Guthega. The river here was for the most part open and already shouting its peculiar muffled roar, as of many voices raised in altercation, above the noise of the storm.

Under the shelter of a cave below the waterfall on Farm Creek I managed to light a fire, boiled the billy and had lunch. Shortly afterwards occurred the mishap that might well have led to tragedy, for, in pressing through a belt of thick scrub which necessitated carrying by ski, I inadvertently dropped my bindings. The wind was rising, and after a futile search, I determined to tramp on, following the Snowy to Pounds hut.

Going was particularly heavy, almost every step breaking through knee deep, many times waist deep, so that across the heavy drift I simply had to crawl on my ski. Had I stopped and dug myself in all would have been well; but foolishly I did not, and somehow missed Pounds Hut (although as I now know I looked directly at it, thinking it to be a rock), pressed on, following the Snowy which was now snowed over. With the single

idea in my mind of reaching the hut, I dragged on, the roaring of the wind in my ears seeming to stifle thought.

Eventually somewhere about midnight, noticing the depression that indicated the river to be fanning out, I concluded that I must be near the head of the Snowy. Actually in a lull, I feel sure that I looked directly at both Seaman's and Foreman's huts, but decided they were rocks. I again foolishly tried to retrace my steps back to Spencer's Creek and Pounds hut. However, moving now over solid ice which made no impression I apparently followed up the Snowy branch towards Mt. Carruthers. Finally in desperation I stopped, and digging a hole in a cleft between beetling rocks, wrapping my sleeping bag around myself, with macintosh ground sheet over my head, I half crouched and dozed waiting for the light.

Daybreak found the wind momentarily moderated, with light snow still falling. However, the cold was still too intense to permit the fashioning of bindings out of spare clips and cords, which were frozen solid. Looking across the valley, I thought I recognised the Guthrie Range, but decided to play safe and follow back to Pounds.

Munching a piece of chocolate, I set out on such a nightmare of a tramp, that, looking back, it is a sheer miracle that I survived. Enveloped in the white wilderness, with falling snow, it was extremely difficult to determine which was sky and which was land, much more to guess at where the depression was that indicated the river, and which way it ran. Anyhow, I apparently struck and crossed the Snowy below Pounds, missing the hut again. With mind and body number and half dead with fatigue, I dragged on. Having on a previous occasion been with an ace of freezing to death, it was this remembrance that forced me to drag my tortured body again and again from the clutching hands of the treacherous snow that sought to bury me to the arm pits.

By this time I was talking to myself, appealing for Divine aid, mocked by the fiendish wind that whipped the words from my lips. Without ceasing, I pounded on all day, but as night fell my cry most surely was heard, for the wind dropped, the skies cleared and the shining glory of the stars heartened my faltering faith.

As day broke and the glorious shafts of sunlight shimmered on the great white monarchs, I found myself gazing at the Perisher, draped in blue transparent shadow,

with the rising sun making a halo of its crest.

Greatly heartened with the promise of a glorious day, despite futile efforts to make a fire, I relished the cold breakfast of Vita Brits, beef, and bread and jam, it being forty-two hours since I had had a meal. Improvising a pair of bindings, I eventually set off in brilliant sunshine, climbing on a compass course S.E. between the Perisher and Back Perisher, which I reckoned would bring me to the snow poles somewhere about the Perisher hut. The snow was wonderful and its musical swish softly droned into the background its previous menace. Soon I was twisting through the timber, following a creek that headed ever downwards to the valley below. Incidentally, I very nearly transfixated a fox, bogged in the deep snow.

The trees and bushes in their mantle of icicles, glistened and sparkled like great diamond chandeliers, and the mountain contours, silhouetted against the blue sky, with wisps of blown snow like gossamer silk, made a vivid and beautiful picture. A picture, however, that my poor closed eyes could only momentarily glimpse, even behind dark goggles. Progress was somewhat slowed by frequent stops to tighten or adjust the cord bindings, and somehow I must have crossed the snow pole line in my half blinded state without noticing, so that nightfall found me still in the open mending my bindings. It was a lovely clear night, and I kept moving slowly through the timber until day break, when I found myself looking down on the Thredbo River Gorge, where timber stretched, to the horizon, showing scanty smatterings of snow.

Feeling now reasonably sure of my position, I decided to cut back, bearing more to the west and south, so as to hit the snow pole line further towards the Chalet. I was anxious to make shelter before nightfall, so I stopped neither for food nor drink, merely munching chocolate and icicles, and travelled as swiftly as I possibly could. I followed the Ram's Head Range for a while until, getting free of the timber, which I found difficult in my half blind condition, I ran down a sloping valley thickly studded with tooth-like outcrops. Again I missed the snow poles, probably running the western side of Charlotte's Pass, across the Snowy, Pounds Creek, and on to the Tate East Ridge.

Had I not been half blind and in a condition of mental stress, it is certain that I could not have traversed ground that was so

familiar to me, without recognising it. Somehow the ridge looked very familiar, and I knew that I must have crossed the Snowy. I decided to climb to the top, and with map and compass try to locate my exact position, although to open my eyes at all was agony.

At the top somewhere between Tate and the Granite Peaks both of which I now definitely recognised, I was greatly reassured, and as a check went to the edge of the range, and there sure enough, away below, lay the heavily timbered gorges of the Geehi River, towards which the sinking sun was moving. Over the dark, bristling porcupine of timber far below were rising ominous banks of clouds. The wind was beginning to rise and light snow to fall. At first I thought of making a run for it to the shelter of White's River timber, but a low moaning of the wind sweeping over the tops warned that time was short. Picking a rock against which the snow was furrowed out in a high cornice, I quickly dug my rucksack well into the bank and making a three feet diameter hole seven feet into the bank, protected on one side by rock, I packed the snow down, put in ski, laid my ground sheets over them, crawled in, took my boots off (never do this) and putting on a pair of dry socks climbed into my sleeping bag. The top of my head at the opening was protected by the end of the groundsheet, which closed the hole in, only leaving a small slit for air. Being thoroughly exhausted I immediately dropped off to sleep despite the rising howl of the wind.

Waking, after what seemed two minutes sleep, but which in reality must have been two hours, I found myself completely buried in the snow and suffocating. Then began a fight for life, which was, if anything, more of a nightmare than the previous torture. Fortunately my body was warm, my feet, even lying in water formed by the melting snow lying at the bottom of the hole, which I had wrongly dug sloping slightly inwards instead of outwards. The cold at my head was so intense that it made my head ache, even through the thick balaclava cap and mackintosh.

In the fight to keep an air hole open, and yet keep out the snow which kept filtering in and wedging me tight in the hole, I lost both mittens, and woollen gloves were quickly gaping, with fingers gashed, raw and bleeding. The rush and roar of the blizzard drove the snow like bullets and sounded like the abandoned shrieking of all the devils out of

Dante's Inferno, bent on my complete destruction.

Only in a supreme confidence in the love of the Heavenly Father could flesh and blood have survived such an onslaught, which kept up without perceptible pause all that night, through the next day and the next night, dying away somewhere in the early hours before the second dawn. In such circumstances, before the terrifying array of nature's concerted forces, mere man sinks to insignificance. The providential ceasing of wind and snow on the second morning and the heat of the rising sun proved my salvation, enabling me to climb out of my hole, thaw out, dig out my rucksack and make for the timber of White's River. By this time, I was all in and desperately needing food and sleep. About 10 a.m. having selected a sun bathed spot in dead timber, I soon had a roaring fire going, and resisting the urge to lie down, made a lean-to shelter, stripped and dried my clothes, made a good meal of bacon and eggs, climbed into my sleeping bag and was dead to the world. Fortunately the weather held for my nap lasted twenty-seven hours, although it only seemed as many minutes.

Greatly refreshed, I remade the fire, which was stone cold, incidentally scorching my ski trousers, one leg of which crumbled to powder. Having used most of my remaining matches I slept or rather dozed before the fire all night, periodically stoking it. After breakfast I found that my bindings had got into the fire. However, raking out the metal clips I fashioned some more, and after waxing the ski with a small iron that I carried, I set off somewhere about mid-day intending to stay the night at Pounds. The ski bindings were not very satisfactory, and the weather having taken a turn for the worse I decided to hug the timber, and so climbed down to the Snowy just south of White's. Here I made a precarious crossing of the rushing waters, nearly being swept off my feet in stepping knee deep from rock to rock. However, in two trips I got myself, my boots, and baggage across, although my legs were as red as lobsters with the icy water.

Thence I climbed up the precipitous sides of the gorge, through thick timber and thawing snow, and so on for many weary miles until I could get on the ski and work my way slowly through the rocks and suckered timber which offered some protection from the wind. Eventually visibility became nil, with a heavy blanket of snow falling and

the wind's voice rising to that high pitched moaning scream that indicates hurricane force. Selecting a sheltered position behind a big rock and under a kindly tree, I tramped a flat bench, took off rucksack and ski, wrapped sleeping bag and mack around me and marked time slowly to keep my feet from freezing. Once or twice I fell asleep and took a header into the snow, but got up and kept marking time until morning. It is hard to describe the terrifying note of the blizzard as it howled its way down to the snowy gorge. It seemed to come like a diving aircraft, screaming down with ear shattering crescendo and then disappearing into the distance. Snow was still falling fairly heavily in the morning but the wind had dropped and visibility becoming better, I made Pounds Hut without further mishap

on the 4th September so that I had been adrift in the white wilderness for seven and a half days.

On entering the hut and seeing myself in the mirror I was frankly horrified. Out of a fungus surmounted by an erie ice coated balaclava cap, peered two eyes with a strange staring expression, so that the glass remained turned to the wall until Thursday morning, when they had regained some of their normality.

After two days at Pounds Hut, mostly sleeping, except when I roused myself sufficiently to eat, I left on Thursday for the Chalet.

Thus ended a trying ordeal the remembrance of which will live with me to the end.