

INTERVIEW WITH TOMMY TOMASI, 22 JULY 1991

GS: Why don't we start with you telling me just a little bit about the history of the Thredbo Ski Patrol?

TT: That started in 1957, that was the first two, Danny and I.

GS: Who did you start it with?

TT: Danny Collman, the two of us. Danny was a tremendous skier, as you know. He won the Australian championship three times, a very good skier. Basically all the hydrologists, Europeans and local ones, you had to be good skiers. You had to be able to go down on skis. Anyway, we started in '57 officially, but we didn't put it up to a particularly good number, to operate properly, until '58. In '58 we had about 12, basically all from the Snowy, people from the electrical section, but European guys, but then of course it got bigger and bigger. Eventually, in 1964, that's when we amalgamated with all the patrol in Victoria, Falls Creek and Hotham, and now we are known as Australian Ski Patrol. But we run independently. Each individual resort run on their own. Like Perisher, the company gives it something perhaps. But as far as the course is concerned, the paramedic course, and the operational side, it's all the same. We all have the same exam. It's become quite a big, substantial body. Funnily enough, the convention we have with different patrols overseas, the operations side of it, particularly the medical side, it's the highest standard that you could possibly get. In Japan or America you can't touch a patient unless you have a doctor on the spot. We do it ourselves here all the time, unless it's a major thing of course, we take it down to the surgery, in case something happens. It has become quite a good operation. But, as I say, Danny and I were the first two, and now we've got all this paper, bits and pieces that's been printed, we're going to put the library together.

GS: Ski patrol, is that voluntary?

TT: Yes, it is voluntary. This is my final years. I'm a life member, this year I still do my duty the same as any other.

GS: During the winter season what's your duty?

TT: Just skiing up and down and picking up broken legs.

GS: But how many days a week would you go up there?

TT: By our constitution you have to do 20 days in a season. It doesn't matter if you stagger it or do weekends, or a week together or a fortnight together.

Some of the boys manage to do a month. We have a roster system. We are obliged by the company to have a certain coverage of it, to have at least 15 patrollers there every day, so we rotate the holiday. It's a good bunch of guys. We've got 79 fully registered at the moment, and we've got some new trainees. And in the company, of course, they have employed 14 patrollers, which are ex volunteers, but they are paid patrollers. They do all the fencing, digging, all that heavy work. We work with them, but we are not obliged to, put it that way. But we get on very well. And they all are from the volunteers. that's their job for the winter. So we have to cover the mountain, we have to have at least 24, 25, to be able to cover Thredbo properly, 25, 26 men. Otherwise, there are too many runs to cover.

GS: So you started back in 1957?

TT: Inclusive, '57, that's 35 years. I just put my foot down and said 'that's it!' they don't want me to pull out. Actually, I met Joyce ... You know where we met? We met at the Chalet, and married there. In 1953 we got married. We spent two and a half years up there, before I joined the Snowy.

Joyce: I was there '52 and 53. Father Boucher came up from Jindabyne, and we had a wedding ceremony at the Chalet.

TT: So we're quite devoted to the area. There's a soft spot, particularly for me, anyway. I love the mountain. I was born and bred in the mountains.

GS: So you're preparing a book, are you?

TT: Well, we'll do the history book on the patrol, yes.

GS: And who are you doing it with?

TT: Just ourselves at the moment. We've got a few solicitors and doctors,

GS: When will it be published?

TT: I would say we'll try to do it by next year. You're quite welcome to have a copy when it's finished. And also, we have a lot of idiom. We had a lot of sequence with '60 Minutes' when we tried to get some money out of the government, for assistance. Ray Martin gave us an interview. Then we had the one from Crean, that caused a lot of friction between us and the Police. You remember the case. The sergeant in charge from Cooma - when there is a major catastrophe, we can't make a decision. I mean we can suggest it, but you have to have an authority to enforce it, so the police obviously is the

logical thing. At that stage, it wasn't necessary to call the patrol. I mean we could have had a lot of men between Perisher and Guthega.

GS: You wanted to go out, and he ...

TT: Well, he didn't actually say no, but he said leave it up to us, we'll go out with the choppers, and things like that. Anyhow, that was the controversy. We had a bit of a cool off period, we had to. Then of course, the ABC, many many years ago we organised a few mock rescues. They dropped me off at the top of Kosci with the choppers, and we had one of our guys acting as a patient, and I had to go and look for him. It was a funny incident, that one, because the first time they put me down they went so close to me they blew my goggles out. They were only about seven feet above me, they had to pack me up again because I looked something dreadful. Anyway, we've certainly got all these films, some in 16mm, some in super 8, some in cassettes, but we want to put them all on video, so it's got to be a lot of work there. But we got the guy to do it, he's got the machines. wind them up and .. does all the photo shots.

GS: So, just to recap, you and Danny Collman formed the Thredbo ski patrol, and was this the first volunteer ski patrol?

TT: That was the first volunteer ski patrol. I would say, as a body, yes. Because they had a rescue in Victoria. I mean we had a rescue at the Chalet, Brian Davidson, but it wasn't an organised patrol. It was just like you and I saying, well, the poor bugger's getting lost, let's go and get him. The patrol is a different thing. It's organised. We have radios, we have contacts, the company says, right we give you a skidoo to go out. It's not like at the Chalet, just amongst the staff, we used to go out. Like we even went to rescue a horse that was there. It was snowing and it was stranded there for 35 days, the poor thing was skin and bones, and it turned out to be a lovely horse, we got him at the Chalet and fed him. Anyway, that's the thing. It wasn't organised.

GS: So that was 1957. What year was it when you started going into the Tin Mine area?

TT: That was not until the Tin Mines station finished in 1956. to be fully operational, the station. You see the full construction went in first. We couldn't go in and gauge unless you've got your weir, some of the creeks had a concrete weir with a *win*. I don't know if you're familiar with gauging. Anyway, that's what you have to have. It was very primitive. You just select the little part of the stream and put a metre apart the tape across, and do it every two feet or one foot, point 8, point 2, that you have a weir, you've got a metre, you've got a correction there, you know exactly what you're getting. So much water goes through and you calculate that with

your velocity and that's that. You've got the flow, so many cubic feet a second of water going round. And it takes five years to rate that, because you have to have it at the minimum flow, high flow and medium flow. Then you do an average and see if it works out ...

G.: So what was the purpose of your survey of that area?

TT: In Tin Mines? To see if it was a viable proposition to store that water.

GS: And where would it be stored?

TT: Well, I would say it would be diverted. Tin Mine Creek flows naturally into the Upper Indi, which is the Murray, but some of it goes down the other side, the Ingegoodbee Creek, for example, Ingegoodbee Creek is on the opposite side of Tin Mine Creek, so you have to, that one goes down to the Snowy, The Pinch. So you wouldn't operate it down there, that water would be wasted, because they weren't interested down below the Snowy. Below Ingebyra, that's it. Consequently, if that Ingegoodbee River, or the Moyangul Creek, that's another one that goes in on the Jacobs River, so you have to divert those, or reverse the actual flow, and to do that you have to put a storage and tunnel or aquaduct that's going down to the upper Indi, divert it there on that side. Eventually it goes down to Tom Groggin, Geehi, down to Mancoban. You've got a substantial amount of water, say 70, 80 cubic feet of water is going down all the time in the minimum flow. Obviously you get a good average between the high and the medium. But apparently it didn't work out that way. It was too costly to divert the Moyangul and Ingegoodbee into the Indi. But we've got a very good record of the upper Indi and the Tin Mine Creek. The Upper Indi, 2,000 vertical drop, that we had to do that, with the floods, we had a flying fox across and we had to carry the big bomb (?), 30 or 40 pound bomb to get the metre straight, that was a ... of a job. Leeches and bushes, high ones. I'm short and I could never see in front of me. Lucky I had Danny. He's six foot. So I put Danny at the front. And climbing back! Going down is not bad. I mean you get a bit of a sore calf muscle, but going up! When you've got 30 or 40 pound on your back. We were fit, young.

GS: I've got a photo here of a hut that we call Stockwhip hut, which I think Wally McGufficke called the Moyangul hut.

TT: Yes, that's the one, double bunks, I'll never forget that. Bully beef. We didn't have the stove facility for cooking there. That was only an emergency hut, in case we got lost, or stranded because of bad weather, but we always tried to make it to Tin Mine, because Tin Mine, in comparison with these, had burning, stove, petrol supply, we had food supply, three nice bunks, plenty of blankets, and the power generator, charger. This one was nothing. Just two mattresses, four blankets and a few bully beef tins. Oh! Eating the bully beef in the winter, frozen!

GS: Was the only reason you would use this in the winter time when there was a lot of snow when you couldn't drive all the way to Tin Mine?

TT: Yes, or vice versa. We couldn't come up too far from Jacobs River up. We had to leave the ? ski into it, so obviously, if it was getting dark or you're tired, that's what .. that was an in between Jacobs River and Tin Mine Creek. And of course we had a station below that, just below that there is a creek running, Moyangul Creek. That was my bunk, all around the top. I always took the top myself, the heat comes up.

GS: Have you got a photo of that?

TT: I think I have, but I don't know where it is.

GS: I could get you a copy.

TT: I'd appreciate it if you have one.

GS: This one's got a little alcove out the front.

TT: A little porch. If you can see, the timber wasn't the best. I think they utilised every bit and scrap that they had. They didn't actually build a hut, like they did at Tin Mine with good new timber. They utilised all the bits of timber they could get from Jindabyne, and came up with a big power waggon, the big jeeps, do you remember the power waggon, they were with GMC, I think they utilised every bit of scrap iron they had after the concrete frame had been (built) and they put it down. In fact it's not so far from the creek, but quite a distance from there to the station, to the Moyangul station. It's so rugged they could never get a clear spot to build a proper weir, so they had to go down and build it on the spot. Yes, it's quite a bit of a walk down, and I remember one day, there was snow, and Danny said we'd walk down, and I said, like hell, I'll ski down. So I put my skis on and he said, well, you go in front. I forgot. There was a tree, a big tree on the right hand side and the roots were under cover, and of course they were just below the snow. One of my skis went under that and the other one went above it, so I screwed up as much as I could, with all the pack and everything, and Danny sat down and laughed. He didn't even ask me how I was.

GS: Was that a concrete weir down there? Is it still there?

TT: A little small concrete weir. Oh yes, they're all there, I would say so. They should be there because nobody has a purpose to destroy them.

GS: So that concrete weir, roughly how far below ...

TT: I would say, roughly, walking down, it might take you about five minutes. It's steep, well reasonably steep, and very bushy, a lot of ti-trees and beautiful gums. Really a wild sort of a country. You wouldn't like to get lost and go down further, They'd never get you out of there. I would love to go back to Tin Mine, of course I don't feel I could walk in, with the National Park, no way you could get a chance to go in there, with a car particularly. I believe this year is the final year they let people come in

from the Victorian side. The Forestry Commission I think amalgamate with the Park Trust to stop people coming in.

GS: Do you know how you could get in? Pat Edmondson, because he's on doing work parties with the Illawarra Ski Club. They go in with vehicles, when they're doing a work party. They've rebuilt the Tin Mine barn which had fallen down. Next time they go on a work party we'll give you a ring and...

TT: I know Pat very well. I might go and see Patrick, he's on the Ingebyra Road now anyway. We used to go through the property there, the Golbys, Tom Golby, a lovely drive. I love the bush there, a rough track of course. It was a very interesting job, I really enjoyed those years there.

. . .

Grace: Conditions were a bit different in Jindabyne in those days.

TT: We had a fibro house. It was cold! Also you know, you've been long enough in the district, the winter that we used to get in those years, we don't get it now. We haven't seen a decent blizzard at Thredbo for over 15 years. I remember when the blizzard came, in fact the chair lift was closed to the public, we used to go up on top and by the time you got up on top you were absolutely a block of ice. I haven't been able to put my chains on for the last 20 years. In the early days we used to put chains on past Penderlea, before you get to the hill there. The seasons have changed, back home too.

GS: America's the same, particularly in Europe ...

TT: When I left the country, we used to get snow right down to 200 metres above sea level. Now to get a good fall of snow you have to get up ...

GS: Were you born in Italy?

TT: Yes. Close to the Swiss border.

GS: Every year, snow down to 200 metres?

TT: Oh yes. I even saw snow in Venice. on the edge of the canal. But it's changed now. Now to get the good snow you've got to go up to about 800 metres. The same as here. Thredbo, we used to have stacks of snow there, down in the valley, at the terminal. One year, '59, after Anzac Day we had a big fall there, we had two feet, and the beginning of May, we had snow up to the rail of the chairlift. Last year was a decent season, but you never get it like that at the bottom, now you've got to go up to about Middle Station to get what we used to get down the bottom, so we're increasing by 350 metres. Virtually the snow line is getting up and it's getting warmer. It's very unpredictable.

GS: Any stories to tell about that one? This hut?

TT: No really, because it was restricted to us, nothing that happened with outside people. I can only recall one night with Doug Thatcher, getting in, we couldn't see from here to there. We eventually found it. We were driving in. We had to leave the vehicle well behind the other side of Bulls

Creek, Jacobs River. We had to leave it there and ski in, with a pack, and we were hungry, wet and cold. And there were no lights, nothing. There was not even a heating stove. We had to get the blankets around us. And that's what I just mentioned, the bully beef, frozen, we had to open up the tin and eat it like that. I looked forward to the day, ..

GS: Wally McGufficke remembers sleeping on a wet mattress there and down at the Tin Mines getting pneumonia.

TT: Yes, and also Wally had an attack of appendicitis. We worried about getting him out. Yes, at the Tin Mines. Of course they couldn't land with a plane there, but we had a good communication. We had our portable radio, plus the one in the jeep, plus the one in the Tin Mine hut. Nothing on this one. In that area we had trouble. It would have been impossible to communicate with one group. We would have to go back to the jeep or to Tin Mine to use the radio. In Tin Mine we had a big base, because we had a little petrol generator to charge the battery. We had lights and everything. That was like a palace there now for us.

GS: Wally told me that there were three buildings put together, two for bedrooms, and one for a kitchen, is that correct?

TT: No. The bedroom and the kitchen was one little hut. But with a door, the walls separating the two. And on the outside (you've got the negative there) is the shelter where we had the 44 gallon drum of petrol.

GS: So there were actually two buildings?

TT: There were two buildings. One with the petrol was just an improvised shack, and on the back of that we had a small little, ... like a box, like a hut, where we had the generator. That was nice, the kitchen, with a table and four little chairs and we had double bunks on one side and a single bed on this side. But we had a spare mattress just in case somebody else came.

GS: And were there usually four of you going in at once?

TT: No, only one team at a time, one team of two.

GS: Hardly ever were there four of you going?

TT: Very seldom would we go in as four, very seldom, because when you had to go out, when you were forced to go out because of an emergency ? so you had to cover a different area. For example, we had floods, we had to have someone on the Jindabyne side to go up the Upper Gungarlin, as far as Kelly's hut. That's another hut. Have you ever been to that one?

GS: I've been to Kelly's hut, lovely.

TT: Yes, well we used to go up there and measure the water up there.

We had a gauging station right in the Gungarlin at the crossing, with the little red hut.

GS: While we're talking about your area, it stretched from Cowombat Flat

up to Kelly's. Was Kelly's the northernmost ...?

TT: That's the northernmost. Oh of course we used to do Eucumbene, Danny and I. We used to go and measure the seepage down at the main tunnel, with the gate inside the tunnel. It's only a little trickle there. We never liked to go in on that. You never know, if that burst, Goodbye Charlie! But anyway, we used to get in with the ladder over the side and put the lights on it while we measured it. It didn't take long. It was a concave sort of a concrete floor. We just measured the trickle there.

GS: And so you did gauging on the Burrungabugge River?

TT: Burrungabugge, yes. We did all that area, we did Tolbar Creek, the Snowy of course in Jindabyne, we used to go to Dalgety, the Snowy at Dalgety, Jacobs River, Tolbar Creek, Devils Creek, the Gungarlin, the Upper Gungarlin, the Middle Gungarlin, and the bottom of Gungarlin before it dropped to Island Bend, of course all the Tin Mine area, Dead Horse Creek, Thredbo, we used to do the Thredbo Diggings, where the new village is now on the Lake Crackenback, that's where we had a flying fox, ~~some~~ Creek right at Dead Horse Gap, before you get to the gap, on the right hand side and the Crackenback comes down on the left hand side. Then we used to do the snow samples, that's to forecast the actual density of the snow, to forecast the runoff. So it was a combined thing, gauging the water and measuring the snow. Yes, a big area. We used to travel a lot. And we were away a lot of the time, weren't we, Joyce.

Joyce: He'd be away a week at a time sometimes.

GS: I spent a bit of time with Wally going through a map and he told me where your seven gauging stations were. There's one on the Jacob's River on the way in, one near Stockwhip Creek Hut, the other one you told me about, one on the Murray River, one at Tin Mine Creek, one on the Ingegoodbee, one near Cowombat Flat (that's the Upper Murray, called Upper Indi below Pilot Creek), and one at Limestone Creek, at the junction with Little Stone Creek.

TT: That's right. That's the furthest out, on the Victorian side. So we had a big area.

GS: Those were the seven gauging stations associated with the Tin Mines.

TT: Yes. We had all the other rivers that we did measure, but no stations. But we did measure them regularly. Plus, we had the forecasts. We used to do the weather forecasting as well. Yes, there was a little station in Jindabyne and we used to do the forecasting. 9 o'clock and 3 o'clock in the afternoon. And the cloud seeding. Did they mention to you about the cloud seeding? We had all the bottles with the funnels, to find traces of silver iodine. When the CSI(RO?) in conjunction with the Snowy, they tried to make a little rain. We used to laugh, because we had so many funnels and bottles

and things spread out everywhere.

GS: Did you every catch any silver iodine?

TT: Oh yes, we caught some samples, but I believe in those days they had to send all samples to America because they couldn't analyse the water here. I don't think they ever [?] any silver iodine. See, unfortunately it does work, only when you have the proper clouds with [?] so you don't know. And if you don't find any trace you don't know if it's the natural rain or produced one. But anyway, we did all that. It was a lot, evaporation on the dam, we did that too. On Eucumbene Dam we used to have a point too, to measure all the evaporation. Wally didn't stay so long with us. He went to Cooma after that. But he did quite a bit. I think he went to Canberra. Eighteen months, I think. The three of us, Danny, myself and Doug, we had various guys coming in. Stefanick I think was the longest. Mel ^{Chin?} Stefanick. He's a Czech. And he's working for the Irrigation Commission now, Water Board. in Sydney.

END OF SIDE ONE

TT: They used to send us up university students, studying to be mechanics. They really didn't have any idea whatsoever of the job. Anyway, we used to take them across.

GS: Do you remember when Sir John Gorton's son came with you? Wally remembers Sir John Gorton's son came.

TT: We took quite a few. I don't remember particularly.

GS: I wrote to Sir John Gorton and asked him to send my letter on to his son and that's what I got back.

TT: ... a couple of Chinese, I think. From China? No, from Hong Kong, and we had a Malaysian. We had quite a few visiting. They'd stay for a week. They used to send them to us when we organised a trip. We used to go in regularly, at least once a fortnight, to Tin Mine. If I go in this week with Danny, the following Doug would go in. So that was an urgent job as far as the Snowy was concerned. Tin Mine was a very important job. So when they knew we were going in for a week, or at least four days, five days, .. sometimes we skipped Limestone Creek. It was too long, too far to go, especially after bad weather. So many trees. And we didn't have a chainsaw or anything. It was all crosscut saws and axes. And sometimes we got bogged with 4-wheel drive. It really was a bugger of a job. But I loved it, I enjoyed it. It's something for me, in the bush, the mountain, it's part of my life. But it was a bit disappointing sometimes. You get sopping wet and cold and miserable and you've got to get an axe out, and you get bogged,

and you run out of this and you run out of that. But we managed to live through it. We had a very big area, compared with the Island Bend section. They had more men and they only did Guthega, Munyang, Valentine Fall. We had a stretch from Kelly's Hut right across to Tin Mines.

GS: You said Charlie Carter had died a couple of years ...

TT: Don't ask me to be accurate. I was talking to Mike O'Shannessy, a sergeant in Jindabyne, he's retired now, and he was a constable. I forget the name of the policeman that went in to get Carter's body and I don't remember exactly the dates, but apparently they found him, he'd been there for a week or something.

GS: So you've spoken to some of the stockmen about Charlie Carter.

TT: Oh, yes, Tom Taylor, Nankervis. That's when I was introduced to drinking rum with milk. the stockmen used to stay in Carter's hut.

And we stayed in our hut. But of course after tea they would come over and have a drink. Of course that was their typical drink. They had a few beers but on the horses' saddles they could only carry very little, so they carried rum. And I'll never forget they introduced me to rum in milk. I didn't watch how they did it. They gave me the amount and I put the milk in it, and I didn't stir it straight away, it was like it had a lump of cheese in it. And they made me drink it and I was sick as a dog after that. but it was good to talk to them because they used to come up and stay there for quite a while and chase brumbies and shoot some of the old deformed brumbies to feed the dogs. It was very interesting to talk to these people.

Yes, Nankervis, Taylors, and there was another ...

GS: It wasn't Herb Hain, was it?

TT: No. Frank, ... he used to be in Adaminaby, and used to work in conjunction with the Lands Department on control for dingoes. He used to come up with Nugget and quite often up at Thredbo. Frank West. I think it was Frank West. He kept control on stock, dingoes, and then there was another one, in Jindabyne, I showed you the little hut when I took you down to the viewpoint above Jacobs, do you remember, I told you there was a very sick man there, he used to trap dingoes down Tom Groggin. Anyhow, I met so many. There were quite a few young ones too. Rough typical stockman, but nice guy. At least we had company. Otherwise we'd just listen to the radio and go to sleep. Or keep up with the computations, ^{it was too cold to} computer on the bank, we'd do it again. That was a bad thing to do, but you usually had to do it, and if you think you're wrong, you could judge it with a metre, you had to redo the gauging. Sometimes the batteries would go flat and you had to change the batteries. You don't remember if you did the point to a point 8, so you had to do it again.

Well, after so many years you know that it's done, and according to the level you know exactly what you should get. It's a very interesting job. Talking to the stockmen was a bit of fun. They were going down to gather in the stock, mustering.

GS: The usual pattern was to take the stock up about December, and take it down about April. Yes.

TT: We used to get snow there about April. March we used to get really big frosts up there. the temperatures have changed completely. That's why we had the heating system in Cooma, we had the kerosene heaters, 'Fireside'.

GS: In those huts you didn't have a wood-burning stove?

TT: No. We had those kerosene things. We had plenty of kerosene and petrol, petrol for the jeep, and of course kerosene for the lamp. In case of emergency, because we had batteries we could use the power. Oh yes, we had a generator and charged the batteries. We had about seven or eight batteries there, 12 volts, so we operated the radio, just one volt, but we used to use a lot of kerosene, you could get more light. As a matter of fact, to enjoy ourselves sometimes we used to light a fire, not in Parkinson's hut, in the big hut, which was stable enough for cooking, a big, huge stone fireplace. And we used to sit down on a piece of timber or a log and just watch the fire. What can you do there? There's nothing much you can do.

GS: Was it Doug Thatcher who took a lot of photos?

TT: Oh, he took a lot of photos, yes. Really keen, taking photos of everything. I did a lot too, sometimes I did a lot of funny things. A nice tree, for example, with the snow behind. He was more inclined to take faces, or if you got bogged with the jeep, that's it. You got photographed to see how much mud was under, that sort of thing. I was more to the flowers, the scenery.

GS: You don't have a photo of Doug Thatcher and Wally?

TT: Yes, I have. I've got a photo of Danny, of Doug. Can I post it to you?

TAPE OF THIS INTERVIEW ENDS HERE.