

# The Kosciusko Fatality of 1928

(By J. W. S. Laidley.)

On Tuesday, August 14th, 1928, W. Evan Hayes and W. Laurie Seaman waved good-bye to their friends at Charlotte's Pass, and were not seen again alive. Thus occurred the first ski-ing fatality in the history of the Australian Alps; and so peculiar were the events which led up to the tragedy, and so fruitless were the extensive searches which were made for the missing men, that it should be of interest to all skiers to present in this, *The Australian Ski Year Book*, as careful and as accurate an account as possible of the circumstances which led up to the accident and the measures which were undertaken in the search.

First of all I propose to give in chronological order the principal events which occurred between the morning of Tuesday, August 14th, and Sunday, September 9th, when Seaman's body was found on the Etheridge Range.

## *Tuesday, August 14th.*

A party consisting of Hayes, Seaman, L. Douglas, E. Sodersteen, T. Bottrell, and R. Utne left Betts's Camp about 10 a.m. No destination was agreed upon, except Charlotte's Pass as an immediate one, because Hayes and Seaman intended at that time to return to Betts's Camp for a late lunch, and then to go on to the Hotel for dinner and a committee meeting that same evening. Consequently no spares, extra clothing or food was carried by the party. The weather was fine, as it had been for the whole of the preceding week, with hot days and cold nights, which had the inevitable result that every westerly slope was practically a sheet of ice upon which a ski would make no mark. The valley snow and the eastern slopes were still soft and skis sank in easily.

About three-quarters of a mile on the Betts's Camp side of Charlotte's Pass, Hayes and Seaman began to draw ahead of the rest of the party, and when they reached the Pass the remainder were about a quarter of a mile behind. The latter now sat down for a few minutes for a rest and a smoke near the small red experimental hut just short of the Pass. While they were resting Hayes and Seaman were seen waving their stocks on the Pass. The remainder of the party waved in reply and in a few minutes skied up to the Pass. When they arrived there Hayes and Seaman had disappeared.

There was no premonition of tragedy, or, indeed, the

slightest anxiety at this stage. The party was somewhat puzzled at their rapid disappearance, but concluded that, owing to their known intention to return early, that they had run down the hill to the Snowy, and would return to Betts's Camp, via Spencer's Creek and the Pounds' Creek Hut. The remainder of the party, therefore, omitted Hayes and Seaman from further consideration as participants in the day's run, and decided that they would go on to the Summit.

Now the condition of the snow was so icy on the western side of Charlotte's Pass that no recent tracks were visible. There were, however, the remnants of many old tracks leading to the Summit which had been made and deepened during the whole of the previous week. The remainder of the party followed the general direction of these tracks which took a middle course between the snow poles on the left and the Snowy River on the right. The Snowy was crossed a few hundred yards downstream from the point at which the road crossed it, and thence the party rapidly converged on the road, crossing it on the hill from the Snowy ford to Dead Horse Ridge. The party then climbed up Etheridge, and during the ascent a sudden blizzard arose. The visibility was immediately reduced to a few yards, the wind reached full gale force very rapidly, and there was some sleet. The time was now about 1 o'clock and the party retraced their steps to Betts's Camp.

They reached the camp at 4.30 in the afternoon confidently expecting that Hayes and Seaman would have already returned.

Their absence caused the first stirrings of anxiety, and late in the afternoon Utne and Bottrell retraced their tracks to Charlotte's Pass. About half-way there they came on a scarf and a glove belonging to Hayes, and owing to the rapidly failing daylight and the severity of the weather conditions they returned to Betts's Camp.

#### *Wednesday, August 15th.*

The full gravity of the situation had been appreciated by now, and those at Betts's Camp immediately took energetic measures, not only to continue their own search, but to send word to the Hotel in order that every measure possible might be taken to find the missing men. Douglas arrived back at the Hotel shortly after daylight, a meeting of the men present in the Hotel was held immediately and a party despatched to Betts's Camp, both to reinforce, and, if necessary, to relieve those who were already there. This party, which included Aalberg, a magnificent skier, but unfortunately a newcomer to the district, arrived at Betts's

Camp during the afternoon. In addition, a party on horse-back started up the Thredbo River from Jindabyne.

During the morning Bottrell and Utne climbed to Charlotte's Pass, ran down to the Snowy River, and turned downstream. After a thorough search of the gorge, they climbed back to Charlotte's Pass and returned to Betts's Camp. Sodersteen and McGrath also went down Spencer's Creek and looked in Pounds' Hut. On the arrival of the supplementary party from the Hotel, the sphere of operations was widened at once. Aalberg immediately set out, descended Spencer's Creek and searched along the east side of the Main Divide as far south as the Blue Lake. He then returned to Pounds' Creek Hut, where he slept the night. The neighborhood of Charlotte's Pass was also thoroughly searched for about a mile in every direction.

#### *Thursday, August 16th.*

The first news of the accident was published in the Sydney press. From Pounds' Creek Hut Aalberg and Soderlund followed the Snowy down as far as the Guthega, climbed over the Perisher to Perisher Creek and thence back to Betts's. In the afternoon, Aalberg and Hemmings covered a certain amount of the Ram's Head Range. The search was also continued in the neighborhood of Charlotte's Pass.

News was also received at the Hotel that the Thredbo party had not left Jindabyne till day-break that morning.

Arrangements were also made to extend the scope of the search with aeroplanes.

#### *Friday, August 17th.*

The search party at Betts's Camp was relieved by a party of Ski Club and Alpine Club members who had left Sydney the night before. They arrived at Betts's Camp about mid-day. Aalberg and Soderlund arrived back at Betts's Camp after a day in the region of the Summit and the Ram's Head. They reported that they had seen the ski tracks of two men leading away from the Summit towards Merritt's Lookout; and also that there were one pair of ski tracks together with some boot marks on the Summit. At Rawson Pass this ski track was joined by a second. During the afternoon the Sydney party ran down Spencer's Creek, again examined Pounds' Creek Hut, and searched the whole of the western side of the Perisher Range, including the Snowy gorge from Spencer's Creek to the Guthega. During the day Aalberg and Soderlund passed within 50 yards of the place where Seaman was eventually found.

The report of the Thredbo party was received at the

Hotel. Leaving at day-break on Thursday they rode up the Thredbo to its source, crossed the Divide, and descended as far as the Victorian border. They returned that night having covered about 70 miles, their horses often being up to the girths in snow and sometimes in black mud swamps. All huts in that region were visited, and, apart from the remains of a fire about three days old, they found nothing to report.

The first aeroplane flew over the mountains.

*Saturday, August 18th.*

Aalberg and the Sydney party set out for the Ram's Head Range to examine the ski tracks seen the day before. These were found easily on the western side of the Ram's Head Range, apparently leading directly away from the Summit towards the Thredbo, and about half a mile south of the bend in the road. The tracks were lost on the crest of the range, but were soon picked up again about 200 feet below the crest on the eastern or Thredbo side. They were traced down hill into the tree-line where they disappeared. The tracks were three or four days old, and it was impossible to tell in which direction they were going. However,



Rocky Outcrop a few yards from the Summit Road, where the body of Laurie Seaman was found.

the party was in a position to state definitely that these tracks were not made by any pleasure party during the previous week, nor were they made by any of the search parties.

Aalberg and Gordon returned along the Thredbo side of the range, keeping as low down in the timber as possible, but had nothing further to report.

Aeroplanes were seen over the mountains during the day, and a second horseback party was started up the Snowy River as far as practicable.

*Sunday, August 19th.*

In view of the fact that the Betts's Camp party was of necessity a small one, and that the tracks investigated the day before were the only clue that had been discovered up to date, it was determined to spare no effort in investigating the upper Ram's Head Range, and to concentrate on one reasonably small area, rather than make ineffectual searches in all directions. The whole of the Ram's Head Range, from Betts's Camp to a point about a mile and a half from the Ram's Head itself was thoroughly searched, from its crest to well within the tree-line. However, the thaw in the last 24 hours had been very great, and the weather conditions were bad. The party returned to Betts's Camp that evening with nothing further to report.

No aeroplanes were seen that day.

*Monday, August 20th.*

The following situation now confronted the Betts's Camp party. Hayes and Seaman had been out for five nights; a heavy thaw and over an inch of rain had combined to destroy any tracks which they may have made; and the one clue to their whereabouts had been followed as thoroughly as possible with no result. In addition to this there was no part of the snow country within a radius of 12 miles of Betts's Camp which had not been traversed in the search.

It seemed, therefore, that it was now useless to continue the search in the high country for living men. If they had failed to reach comparative shelter it was certain that they were not alive, but if they had succeeded in reaching the Thredbo or some other river valley, it would have been possible for them to live for weeks.

With these considerations in mind the intensive search from Betts's Camp was now abandoned and the Sydney party returned to the Hotel. It was recommended that the river valley searches continue for the next week or two, and that Betts's Camp be occupied simply with a skeleton party. This was done.

Although from now onwards touring parties to the Summit were frequent, it was not until Sunday, September 9th, that a party led by Mr. Mander Jones discovered the body of Seaman lying on some rocks at the foot of Sentinel Rocks, not 30 yards from the road. His skis were found a few yards away from the body. With his body was found a camera, which contained a roll of exposed film. This was developed, and, although partly damaged by exposure to the weather, two photographs were obtained. These were both taken at the Summit cairn, and in one was Hayes, and in the other Seaman. Mr. Mander Jones also found Hayes' second glove on Charlotte's Pass.

A coroner's inquest was held at the Hotel, where it was found that Seaman died of continued exposure to extreme cold, consequent on being caught in a blizzard. The body of Hayes has not yet been found.

These, then, are the facts surrounding the accident, and it is not easy to draw any convincing conclusions from them as to how the two men met their fate. However, I set down the following as the theory which appeals to me as being most feasible.

Hayes was a man who had had many years experience at Kosciusko, but most of his ski-ing had been done below Betts's Camp. It seems certain that he had never led a party to the Summit in the winter, and there is only one record of his having been to the Summit. Seaman was a fine athlete, who had been an air pilot during the war, but who had only one year's experience on skis. It can be regarded as almost certain that after leaving Charlotte's Pass Hayes became the natural leader. Why Hayes abandoned his gloves and scarf at the Pass cannot be explained. It is most probable that they dropped unnoticed from his pocket. A peculiar feature is that Hayes on the Summit had a glove in his hand, as may be seen in the photograph.

Let us suppose that after leaving Charlotte's Pass and not having a very good knowledge of the country, they decided to go to the Summit and keep to the snow poles all the way. They would be out of sight of Charlotte's Pass in 10 minutes, and the snow poles cannot be seen from the route taken by the remainder of the party. The western side of the range for about 3 miles was extremely hard and icy, and, as they approached Sentinel Rocks, Seaman, who was not very adept on skis, decided to abandon his and walk on to the Summit. In the conditions this would have been far easier going. They proceeded together to the Summit: Hayes on ski and Seaman on foot; there they photographed one another. By this time it would be about mid-day or after, and from the evidence of the rest of the party we know that at this time the fog came up. Indeed,



EVAN HAYES.



W. LAURIE SEAMAN.

From films found in a camera on Seaman's body, evidently exposed on the Summit on the day of the tragedy.

the photographs look as if they were taken in fog, but too much reliance must not be placed in this because the films had suffered much from exposure. Another point of extreme interest in the photographs is that neither man was wearing his skis at the time the photographs were taken. Only one pair of skis are visible in the background. If we add to this the evidence of Aalberg who saw the ski tracks of only one man on the Summit and many boot tracks, our suspicions must approach certainty.

They are now on the Summit in the fog, and to return they must separate. Seaman decides to follow the snow posts back to the place he left his ski, and Hayes decides to run down to Rawson Pass the most direct way possible, to cross Etheridge and pick up the snow poles at the point where Seaman left his skis.

It is with considerable conviction that I believe that Seaman reached the meeting place without incident and sat down to wait for Hayes. Hayes failed to put in an appearance, and Seaman very rightly refusing to abandon the meeting place was benighted. During that night he slept and met his death. Had he been alive the next morning, he was on the snow posts, the weather was not impossible, and then it would have been far better to return to Betts's than to continue to wait.

What happened to Hayes is far more problematical. The mystery directly hinges on the existence of the tracks leading to the Thredbo. Let us examine the matter in detail. That there were tracks leading in a straight line between the Summit and Merritt's Lookout is certain. That there were four tracks for a few hundred yards on the west side of the Ram's Head Range is certain. That at least two ski tracks disappeared into the timber below Merritt's Lookout is certain. That no pleasure party made the tracks is certain. In this regard, only two parties penetrated to within a mile of this area. One during the preceding week included Dr. Fisher and myself and turned back on to the road at least a mile north of Merritt's Lookout; and the second included Dr. Teece and Mr. Moulden. They were in this direction the day before the accident, but did not go so far south, and, although they kept to the east side of the Ram's Head for some of the time, they never were more than a few feet below the crest, and certainly never as low down as the timber. Finally, no search party had been in the vicinity.

It seems reasonable to believe, therefore, that these tracks were made by one or both of the missing men. I emphasise this point because during the search on the 18th and 19th of August it was assumed that one pair of tracks belonged to Hayes, and the other pair to Seaman. This

assumption influenced our course of action at the time considerably, because it caused us to spend much time in making sure that these tracks did not emerge from the Thredbo again in another place. We were sure that if they were in the Thredbo still, they would have been picked up by the riding party. Grant, however, that the tracks were made by one man, one pair descending into the Thredbo, and the other pair climbing out of it again, and we have a far more possible state of affairs.

Seaman leaves Hayes at the Summit or at Rawson Pass, and Hayes cuts straight across the Etheridge Range intending to pick up the road again at the place where Seaman's body was found. He keeps too far to the south and misses the bend in the road. The blizzard is behind him and the path of least resistance leads precisely in the direction of the tracks. He comes to the edge of the Thredbo scarp, realises that he has been travelling for some length of time and hopes he has reached Charlotte's Pass. After a few hundred feet he is undeceived, and he retraces his steps.

If we accept this theory as substantially correct, we will probably have to postulate that Hayes' body will be found in the snow country. It is a small point, but worth mentioning that when Aalberg first saw the tracks on the Summit he said that there was only one pair of ski tracks on the Summit itself, and that they were joined by a second pair at Rawson's Pass. Let us look at it in another light: It is just possible that the second track at Rawson Pass was made by Hayes on his return journey from the Thredbo; at a steady rate of ski-ing he would reach this point about nightfall, and the thick weather would preclude any possibility of him seeing the snow poles. The steep side of Kosciusko would insensibly force him down into the Snowy, and it is there that he probably met his death.

At this point then our story must come to an end. There is nothing more certain in my mind than that Hayes' body will be found some day, probably by a shepherd, and then and not till then can any further light be thrown on the wanderings of these two unfortunate men. It was with considerable trepidation that I persuaded myself to enter into any speculation at all with regard to their fate, but I have heard so many impossible theories advanced that I thought that it might be interesting to imagine something that at any rate would square with the facts as known. So little faith do I place in this theory, however, that no one would be more astonished than myself if it happened to be substantially true. There are so many possibilities, and so many factors that any hypothesis must be too largely eked out with imagination.

With regard to the search itself, everything was most efficiently organised from the Hotel; no time was lost in covering the most likely areas, and without exception all help was most willingly offered and accepted. I am convinced that no blame whatever can be attributed to the other members of the unfortunate party; the whole matter was beyond their control from the outset, and the immediate measures taken by them were completely in accord with the best traditions of the sport. One point I mention more from regret than with any idea of conferring blame, that the matter was kept from the press as long as it was. No one is more conscious of the dilemma than I. Were they to create a sensation and wholly unwarranted anxiety about a matter which would speedily be righted, or were they to keep silence and waste valuable days? The handicap of arriving three days after the disappearance was terrific, and the resulting failure almost inevitable.

With regard to the actual technique of searching, a little might be said. Aeroplanes seem to be only of slight value. At the height they were compelled to fly, it is almost certain that no man who was not moving would be noticed, and quite doubtful whether a man who was moving would be seen. Aeroplanes were over us several times when we were on the range, and on our return to the Hotel I was informed that no living object had been seen by them. It was also found that even in the simplest country a line of individuals rapidly lost touch; and after one experience of this I was careful to arrange my party in small groups of two or three, each of which was completely self-contained with respect to equipment, food, etc. Each group was given a definite beat and instructed that on no account were the individual members to separate.

Lastly, the essential feature of a snow search is an extensive immediate one. I consider that if it had been possible to send out three parties on the Wednesday, one to follow the Ram's Head Range as far south as possible, a second to go to the Summit, and a third to go due west from Charlotte's Pass in the direction of the Blue Lake, any tracks made must have been found. However, if Nature had actively tried to place difficulties in the way she could not have done more. The snow was extremely hard, and just at that time began to thaw very rapidly, and finally the weather conditions varied from indifferent to bad. Practically no snow fell on the day of the accident or during the first week of the search.

The material for this article has come to me from many sources. During the last few months all who were connected with the search were written to and asked to send in reports on what they had done and where they had

been. The response was most gratifying, and I must return thanks on behalf of *The Australian Ski Year Book*, to all those who assisted in making this article possible. The available material seemed to be remarkably complete, and there are few gaps in our knowledge which have not been filled in. However, there are doubtless many omissions and misinterpretations due to my editorial inadequacy for which I make humble apology here and now, and suggest that any matter which is astray will be corrected in a letter to the Editor of *The Australian Ski Year Book*.

### SUPPORT FROM KIANDRA.

Independently of the search at the Kosciusko end of the range, so lucidly described above by Dr. Laidley, an endeavor to locate the missing men was made by the well known Hughes brothers, of Kiandra. The story is graphically told by Mr. W. Hughes, who is a tower of strength to Australian ski-ing, and who accompanied the Ski Club Expedition from Kiandra to Kosciusko in 1927.

Mr. Hughes's story is as follows:—

"Messrs. Hayes and Seaman had been lost several days before word came to the Elaine Mine of their disappearance, so, reasoning that sufficient time had elapsed for them to have travelled even into our vicinage, R. Hughes and the writer decided to search. Donning the crosscountry skier's usual outfit, and including extra food, stimulants, etc., in our kits, we set out, entertaining a forlorn hope of falling in with the missing men somewhere south of Mount Tabletop, and intending if the weather continued favorable to search right through to Kosciusko.

"From the summit of Tabletop (5728ft.) the low country to the southward was subjected to a searching view through field glasses. About one half of the ground was snow covered, with bare patches somewhat regularly interspersed, giving an appearance of a gigantic chess board. After leaving Tabletop our moves towards the south were checked again and again by tributaries of the Happy Jack River, swollen by melting snow, which forced us to go many miles to the east. Towards evening the last stream was crossed and we turned west and reached the 'Booby' Hut at sunset.

"As there was no bedding in the hut the night passed slowly. The Doubtful River, some three miles further on, was crossed at 8, and Farm Ridge Hut reached at 9 o'clock next morning. On reaching the Jagunal Saddle two hours later our skis and stocks, which we had hitherto carried, were fastened on. Mount Jagunal was covered by dense fog, and everywhere towards the west a dense black cloud was very much in evidence.

"The wind, which had been blowing strongly all morning, whirled fine snow around us with increased vigor in our exposed position. We struck out in what we judged to be a direct line for Gungartan Hut. The wind increased gradually in force,

carrying with it fine dry hail, until some two miles from the hut it reached an intensity the like of which neither of us had in a lifetime on the snow experienced before. All thought of Hayes and Seaman had for the time gone out of our heads. We were in imminent danger of being lost ourselves, and for the time being thoughts of self-preservation were uppermost.

"Heads downward we plodded on. Some tracks of skis in hard ice on a ridge were examined with interest, but by the direction they were pointing and the number of them we came to the conclusion that they could not be those of the men we were searching for. We considered them to be more probably the tracks made by the party who had climbed Mount Jagunal (for the first time) earlier in the winter.

"At last the spot where Gungartan Hut was expected to be was reached, but the hut could not be seen. Shouting in each other's ears, above the roar of the wind, we discussed the advisability of running down off the high ground and spending the night somehow in the timber country. However, we decided to put in another half-hour in search among the boulders for the hut, and to our great relief had spent but a few minutes of this time when we found our objective hidden behind a huge boulder and partly covered with snow. It was found to be well stocked with provisions and bedding. If the members of the Ski Club of Australia could realise what the finding of that little eight by ten hut meant to us, half frozen as we were and with no place of shelter within miles, they would perhaps have some idea of the sincerity of our thanks to them for erecting and equipping it.

"The force of the wind decreased overnight and the sun rose next morning in a cloudless sky with a temperature below zero. It seemed to us as if any man exposed to the blizzard overnight could not have possibly survived, and as the drifting hail had made tracking impossible we decided to abandon all hope of finding the missing men and return direct to Kiandra. Quick time was made to a spot just east of Jagunal Saddle. Here skis and stocks had to be again shouldered. A long detour to the east from Farm Ridge and Booby Huts was made so as to cross Happy Jack and Doubtful Rivers nearer their heads.

"The freshly fallen hail and very long snow grass made walking very slow and tiring. Crossing the last creek running into the Happy Jack at about 4 in the evening, the climb to Tabletop started. Ridge after ridge, each going to be the last, was surmounted, until at dark the base of the mountain was reached. Circling around it, the descent to the Elaine was started at about 7 o'clock and the mine reached about an hour later. Fully forty miles, ski-ing only ten, walking and carrying full equipment for the rest, in twelve hours, is a performance we do not wish to again attempt.

"Our chance of being successful in achieving our objective seemed during our three days' search to be ever very remote, but the satisfaction of knowing we had tried was sufficient recompense for our trouble."

## A MESSAGE OF THANKS.

On behalf of the committee and members of the Millions Ski Club, I desire to express through your columns our sincere gratitude to all those who assisted so nobly in the search for our missing members (Messrs. Hayes and Seaman) who were lost in a blizzard at Kosciusko in August last. The efforts on the part of all were unselfish, untiring and often fraught with serious risks. Upwards of 50 men contributed their efforts in no mean way. We realise that this number would have been increased ten-fold had it not been for the fact that only men with some knowledge of ski-ing could negotiate the difficult snow country.

Special mention and thanks are due to those members of both the Ski Club of Australia and the Kosciusko Alpine Club, who journeyed specially from Sydney at their own expense, and spent many days in inhospitable country exploring every avenue in the hope of success. The immediate response by these kindred Clubs to render assistance in our hour of need is symbolical of true and genuine good fellowship.

Our thanks are also extended to those residents of Jindabyne, who contributed their share to the search at personal loss; and also to the members of the Hotel staff who worked tirelessly, especially to G. Aalberg, whose wonderful efforts were greatly appreciated by all the experts.

To those members of the University Ski Club and the Royal Automobile Club of Australia who both postponed their pre-arranged carnivals and were eager to render all possible assistance we are deeply grateful. Our thanks are also due to the Aero Club of N.S.W., the Royal Australian Air Force and Air Travel, Ltd., for assistance in the search from the air.

That the efforts of all were not crowned with success is to be regretted, but one thing was proved: every man taking part in the search gave of his best.

KEITH P. BATH,

Hon. Secretary,  
Millions Ski Club.

The Davos English Ski Club is the oldest of all British Ski Clubs, and the second oldest of any Ski Club in Switzerland. It was founded just over 26 years ago last January by a small body of enthusiasts, and has had a continuous existence ever since.