

The Threadbo and a Search Party

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A long stretch of bad weather which kept us round the Chalet led once again to the idea of exploring more runs down the sheltered Threadbo Valley. It was still windy and snowing lightly when a party of seven set out after breakfast. We climbed slowly to the pole on Stilwell and leaving it on our right went across about a mile of rolling flats until we came to the steep sides of the Threadbo Valley. Below us was a clear wide slope dropping to a sharp little gully giving about 1,000 feet of good light snow.

We found the bottom of the narrow funnel full of unexpected bumps and hollows which caused a certain amount of dodging round bushes and a few unexpected leaps over small unseen cornices. At about 500 feet above the floor of the valley, the bush became very thick and we started the climb back.

Our visiting Canadian went ahead without skins and the rest of us made our way up in pairs at varying climbing speeds. By now the sun had gone in and we had the full force of the wind in our faces. Fog and snow had made the visibility very bad and by the time the top was reached we could no longer see the pair ahead.

We all got back to the Chalet at varying times between 1 p.m. and 1.30 p.m. only to find the visitor had not turned up. He had last been seen at the top of Stilwell, had checked his direction by pointing his stick and moved on while his companion removed his skins.

Immediately after a quick bite of lunch all available skiers gathered in the ski room and it was decided to divide the strongest into parties of two. The probable area to be covered would have to be on or around Stilwell, so that with six parties available we arranged that three should go up Stilwell by different routes to look for tracks.

By the time they were prepared it was 2.30 p.m. and it was agreed that parties should return and report progress by 4 p.m. It was snowing hard with fog and wind and was obviously settling down for a dirty night. By 3.45 p.m. all except the party over to the Snowy River had returned. No tracks had been found near the top of Stilwell and though occasional traces of single tracks were seen in the woods it seemed unlikely that, if

they were the Canadian's, he would not have been home by then. The search parties retired to get warm and get some tea with the prospect of having to go out to Seaman's and Pound's huts in the already failing light.

About 4.15 p.m. the searchers from the Snowy came in with a cold but cheerful Canadian and a story of extraordinary good luck.

Instead of coming down the valley to the Chalet from the summit of Stilwell he had veered to the left, and gone down the far side of the ridge to the Snowy. He had passed between the snow poles without seeing them and started to climb the other side. He was a little surprised to find there were no trees (he had only seen the area in bad weather) but went on until he reached the "top of the ridge." One can only assume in view of the time he was moving that he reached the top of the Main Range. Realising this was obviously wrong he turned back and trying to follow his own tracks he eventually came again to the snow poles which this time were visible. As he had only seen an old and inaccurate tourist map which showed a non-existent road he turned south along the five-mile road to the summit of Mt. Kosciusko.

The searchers who eventually found him had meantime seen no trace and were about to return when faint tracks were seen near the top of Stilwell on their second circuit. After searching more traces were found and so circling round and picking up a mark here and there they came to the snowpoles at the very moment that the Canadian returned and was starting along them away from the Chalet. He had been moving hard since 12.45 p.m., but in spite of the wind and thin clothes he was still thinking clearly and quite calm.

This method of arranging the search covered all the nearby ground. In addition, someone at the base was appointed to check the parties and collate the information brought in so that, should the tracks but not the missing person be found, all forces could later have been collected to search the most likely area more thoroughly. We were all relieved that on this occasion it was not necessary.