

WHEN THE ALPS MEANT ADVENTURE

By Gerald V. Rush

Who remembers the first Club trip to St. Bernard and Hotham? We had not calmed down from the success of our initial trips to Mt. Buller in 1924, and were all agog to explore Hotham at the first opportunity in 1925—King's Birthday week-end in early June. I remember the keen disappointment at the Club meeting in May, when it was announced that there was little or no snow at Hotham; but what a shock was in store, when heavy snows barred the motor transport five miles or so from the St. Bernard Hospice! And what a gruelling trudge it must have been through the fresh soft snow for the party of about twenty, who expected to be carried with suitcases to the door of the Hospice!

I heard all about it when I arrived at St. Bernard that night, somewhere between eight and nine o'clock, coming from the other direction. I had gone up a few days before, and found quite good snow at Hotham, despite the pessimistic report. I remember delivering a letter to Bill Spargo at the newly opened Hotham Heights cottage, and imagining that I was, possibly, the first ski postman to traverse Hotham.

Shortly after my arrival, the weather broke completely. Heavy snow began to fall on a fiercely cold wind. I was not looking for trouble, and decided to stay the night at Hotham Heights cottage. Next morning, it was blowing and snowing as hard as ever. This was the day the big party led by Perce Goldby was to arrive at St. Bernard, and I was anxious to get away for the Hospice as soon as possible. Bill Spargo, however, advised me to wait for the weather to lift a bit, and I waited impatiently into the afternoon.

As I was the one to lead the Club party across to Hotham, I felt I was letting my clubmates down badly in not being at St. Bernard to meet them; and when the weather did seem to be easing off in the late afternoon, I set out, after cajoling Bill Spargo into lending me a couple of blankets for a possible sleep-out in the snow.

Climbing to the cairn on Hotham was all in a day's work, even if not very pleasant; but in the flat stretch on top it was a different matter. With the fog pretty thick, I had to go 10 or 20 yards out past some of the poles (glancing back all the while) before I

could see the next. One particular pole must have held me up for a quarter of an hour. Advancing as far as I dared, I could not see the next. I kept returning to my base pole and trying to decide what to do. Suddenly, on a momentary improvement of the light, I caught sight of a pole away out to the left in a direction at right angles to that in which I had been peering.

I well remember the excellent progress I made for the next 20 minutes or so. Just before reaching the bottom of the descent into the Hotham Saddle, I began to feel quite cheerful, and made a stop to take off my rucksack, to get a hot drink of cocoa from a thermos flask. As soon as my gloves were off, however, I felt my hands beginning to numb; so on again went the gloves, and back went the unopened thermos.

About this time the sun set, and the light, which had seemed to improve, faded out badly as I turned the sharp corner round the south side of Little Hotham. With the snow eight feet or more deep, there was not a sign of the road, and the only guides were occasional rocky outcrops which were (I hoped) the edge of the cutting. As I peered through the murky gloom and proceeded slowly on the ski, trying to keep the same horizontal level round the sidling, I had an eerie experience. I don't remember getting much of a fright. The event happened too suddenly. One moment there was nothing in front of me; the next there was a large dingo crossing my route, not ten yards in front of me. It made no sound that I could hear, no change in its course uphill. Within a matter of seconds it had vanished completely. Whether it saw me, I do not know.

After some anxious moments (as the hillside forced me further to the left towards timber) I found myself on what was unmistakably the road, protected from the wind by trees. But what a jolt I got when I ran out of the trees (I suppose they have since been burnt out) into the treeless saddle where Blowhard Hut was subsequently erected! I slithered on carefully until the ground began to rise to meet Mt. Blowhard. Should I go to the right or to the left? After staring for some minutes at the rising snow in front of

me, I thought I could make out the sign of a road—a break in the profile of the snow—going towards the left; and I made for it. I realised, however, that a decision at this point meant a lot, and I decided to probe around the right hand of this narrow-looking hill, just as a precaution before committing myself to the course to the left. Imagine my surprise when I came across a rock edge that looked artificially cut, and at finding a deep wind scour that left no doubt that a road, and a pretty good one at that, was underneath. Along the whole half-mile length of the Blowhard, the wind scour continued, and I needed no light at all to proceed along this natural gutter, with the outside wall of snow rising to five feet or more.

I don't remember having any trouble rounding the two little Blowhards, and the remaining 2½ miles was a pleasant ski trip, even if the going was slow in the dark. I didn't even feel weary climbing out of the Smythe saddle, so good did it seem to be getting near "home"—a good log fire, a long-delayed meal, and the companionship of the rest of the party.

Next morning there was a thick fog; but the whole party (except Alick Davison and Jack Macfarlane, who were feeling the effects of the slog of the previous afternoon) made the trip on skis to Hotham. We could see only 100 yards or so, and few of the party had the faintest idea of what the surroundings were like.

Near the Diamantina Hut, Clive Morrish urged that the Razorback was the path to Hotham. Fortunately, I was quite clear that it was otherwise.

From the Diamantina, we went up to the summit of Hotham, and Gus, Ecklund upheld the honour of his native Sweden by finishing first in the run down to the cottage.

After an enjoyable hot dinner, those who were less experienced with ski got away to an early start for the journey back to St. Bernard. On the way down, Harry Tregellas tired somewhat, and our grand old snow veteran, "Wilkie" (the late R. W. Wilkinson who was our connection with a previous generation of skiers) had trouble with his toe binding. It was pitch dark when the last of us got in, but all were in good heart and sorry to have to leave for Melbourne next day.