A COLD NIGHT OUT

by
Robert Rankin

I still have the photograph I took by holding my camera at arm's length and pointing it back in my direction. It is slightly blurred because I could not guess the distance accurately and this blurring has softened the image somewhat and removed what I had hoped to capture-the ordeal of spending a lonely night out on a steep mountain slope in mid-winter without a sleeping bag! I took the picture at sunrise and this has added a warm and rosy glow which also helps paint a very wrong impression. It was taken in the early seventies and this photo is all I have to remind me of that day-and night. Looking at it now I find it hard to remember just how cold it was.

A small group of us had planned to spend the day climbing Mount Lindesay *(pictured, as viewed from Mt Barney)* in south-east Queensland. New to bushwalking and with mostly only somewhat easier peaks under our belt, for some reason we felt we were wired for any eventuality. Arrogance makes youth almost unstoppable and so it was that we found ourselves still going uphill as the shadows of late afternoon cast long shafts of darkness across the landscape. In our minds there was no question of turning back for we had expended too much time and energy putting ourselves at last within striking distance of the summit.

This attitude now seems laughable and in fact seems to resemble the famous last words of many a mountaineer who has pushed too far and too hard for too long-where the desire to reach the top is intense enough to override the sensible decision to stop. In the big mountains, the distinction between success and failure, life and death is small and it takes very little to tip the balance.

Our mountain of course was no Himalayan giant and winter nights in south-east Queensland rarely go below zero degrees. This was no life-threatening situation. We understood that, so we pushed our luck to the edge and somewhat beyond for we knew we were not playing for keeps.

We reached the summit finally at four o'clock and quickly looked around for a view but there was little to see through the dense foliage. I remember staying on top no longer than a couple of minutes. As teenagers, we were definitely in peak-bagging mode. Climbing mountains was simply about ticking them off, one after another, with no real appreciation of the surroundings or the environment. This hill had finally succumbed and we were glad of that!

The descent involved several abseils followed by a long traverse back through a belt of rainforest growing in the shade of the rock face until finally we could gain a steep path which took us down through a lower line of cliffs. Below this, a long but easy ridge descended gently back to the base of the mountain. I knew we could climb down this last part quite safely at night. The only doubt was whether we could reach these easier slopes before darkness closed in.

First down the abseils, I went ahead to try to reach the final cliff before nightfall to pinpoint the descent route through its steep defences. I didn't make it. By the time I gained the top of this final drop the last

red glow had vanished from the western horizon. The others were still somewhere back in the darkening rainforest, stumbling through vine thickets and over decaying and crumbling logs.

I crawled to the edge of the cliff and peered into the blackness below. I knew it wasn't a long way down-probably no more than fifty or a hundred metres. The route involved a series of grassy steps which broke the cliff into short and easier sections. I found a small rock and tossed it into the void hoping to hear it strike the ground a short distance out in front of me. But no, there was a long and dreaded pause of several seconds before I finally heard a sharp crack as the missile smashed onto hard and rocky ground far below.

In the dark I carefully moved further along the top of the cliff and repeated the process. Again a long pause and again the distinct sound of the projectile shattering on hard ground. It was no good. Our escape route had dissolved into the inky darkness. The only safe option was to wait until daybreak when the dawn light would again reveal it to us.

Reluctantly, I climbed back up a short distance to find some level ground. It must have been only six o'clock. A long night awaited me. I called out to the others but received no reply. In the rainforest the light would have disappeared much sooner so they would have stopped perhaps half a kilometre further back. In the darkness it would have been hard for me to backtrack to them so I opted to stay put and wait for dawn.

I had a jumper and thankfully a fairly large pack. When I placed my feet in this and extended the throat I could cover myself almost up to the waist. The westerly winds of August roared overhead as I lay down on the open ridge and tried to make myself warm. I know now I would have been warmer had I retreated back into the cover of the rainforest but either way it would still have been an uncomfortable night.

I might have slept briefly from time to time but I do not really know for how long. Those twelve hours of darkness and cold were amongst the longest twelve hours I have experienced. I cannot remember if I was wearing a watch but I think not because I recall repeatedly peering towards the eastern horizon hoping desperately each time to see the first pale glimmer of the new day. All I saw was inky blackness. At other times I remember shivering so violently my whole body shook.

Then, the next time I looked I did notice a change. Suddenly the eastern horizon was discernible. Night was drawing to an end. With relief I sat up and watched as the cold grey light turned to crimson and then orange. The leading tip of the sun appeared like a shining sliver sparkling briefly over the tops of the ridges of Lamington before finally the full orange ball appeared. Instantly the landscape flooded with warmth and light and just as quickly I forgot the ordeal of the night. It was almost as if it had never happened. The route was now obvious and we would all be off the mountain in a very short time.

I will never forget that night although the misery of the long wait has mostly faded from my memory. I know I was very cold but I cannot now remember just how really cold I was. Mostly it is the positive aspects that remain. It was an unplanned adventure but I am glad I had the experience. Even so, I have never bothered to return to the mountain. Maybe someday I will.