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One Man's Climbing: Recollections of a Mediocre Mountaineer

Like most of my generation I missed the hemp rope by a fair margin but started climbing with a hemp waist-length, always difficult to put on exactly right and bloody painful when you fell off. I never did understand all that stuff about leaders never falling off; the school of climbing I started with had one basic rule: don't sit underneath the bloke who's leading because he'll usually land on you when he falls off! This lesson was learnt sitting under the first pitch of *Cobweb Crack* on the Cromlech in 1966 and being quite surprised to find an annoyed leader inches above my head hanging off a groaning runner that we had found on Sabre Cut the day before. The other two equally dodgy runners had jumped out in surrender as he passed them on the way down to test the third. Those old machined nuts threaded onto hawser-laid nylon never did work that well when you wanted them to. Quite how this episode failed to end up in the casualty ward in Bangor I'll never know. The rope burns on my hands and arms were a painful reminder for weeks afterwards.

This early introduction to the art of climbing was interrupted by a spell of voluntary service with the Army in 1967 and, as luck would have it, I found myself attached to the newly formed RAF Mountain Desert Rescue Team based at Sharjah in the Trucial Oman States. The RAF lads, led by Harry Wragg, were keen to continue the Kinloss MRT traditions of hard days on the hill followed by even harder nights on the Tiger Beer. It was a sort of Kinloss in the sun. My previously peculiar climbing practices were soon swapped for the safer procedures of the professional Mountain Rescue Team: my apprenticeship had begun. These lads were a strange mixture of mountaineers in uniform, almost the equivalent of the modern climbing bum. Every opportunity was seized to get out on the hill and to escape the discipline of service life. Inspections, scrutiny by senior officers and guard duty were all avoided by sudden and hastily planned rescue practices which took us away for convenient periods of time into the mountains.

It was not long before we discovered acres of virgin rock hiding away among the vast wilderness that surrounded us. Our time was spent lowering stretchers, climbing the arid 'peaks' and making first ascents. It was almost impossible not to put up a new route – every crag for miles around was untouched and only frequented by spiders and the odd scorpion. My diary records a first ascent of *Savage Slit* – '180 feet and bloody hard'. I suppose it was in bendy boots; looking at the slides that were taken at the time I guess it was about 4a. Another climb is only

recorded as *Wee Mac's Route*, named after the Scottish dynamo who led it, and described as 'quite hard'. Mac had run out of runners just before the final few moves but had managed to jam in the knot of a sling for protection before he climbed an overhanging crack. Considering it was 300 miles from the nearest anything it was a very bold lead indeed, despite the fact that there was a rescue team jeering and hooting at us from below!

After a spell of lunacy chasing bandits in Oman and getting shot at, I left the army and got a 'job' at Plas y Brenin for no money and very little anything else. I always seemed to be hungry and soon developed the art of being strategically placed when one of the students was buying a round. However, when my boots fell apart John (Jacko) Jackson, the director at the time, did take pity on me and bought me a new pair. It was at the Brenin that I first saw Joe Brown when he stayed for tea and gave a few of us a lift up to the Pass afterwards in his new Volvo and dropped us off at the Cromlech boulders. I couldn't bring myself to yell 'See ya Joe', like the others did. I only managed a feeble wave with lower jaw swinging open.

Those months at Capel Curig, working on winter courses under the direction of Rowland Edwards, were a whole new learning experience. Edwards I found to be the safest and most professional climber I have met. Not only did he spend his time working carefully with the students on the courses but he also spent time with the various voluntary penniless staff, turning us into mountaineers. Lessons I learned then I have never forgotten and safe practices he taught me have on at least one occasion prevented disaster in the Alps. With Rowland we climbed a verglased *Tennis Shoe* on the Idwal Slabs, learned to snow-hole, had epics on long winter climbs and improved our rock-climbing skills beyond recognition. By the time the summer arrived I was sharing a room with another penniless itinerant climber, Arthur de Kuzel. Arthur's socks had an awesome reputation, one which I could personally vouch for. However, he was planning to go to Chamonix and suggested that I went as well. Could I stand the socks for a month, I asked myself? But in the end it was a question of cash, of which I had none, and I reluctantly watched him depart. It was soon after this that we heard he had been killed with Richard Caine on the E face of the Grand Capucin, cruelly hit by lightning on the final pitch. That particular storm killed 16 climbers in the Mont Blanc massif that night. Had I gone with Arthur I might have ended up a statistic.

Towards the end of the summer Jacko had a conversation with me that ended with me applying to Bangor for teacher training. His fatherly advice may have been prompted by the fact that my boots were wearing out again and it was cheaper to get rid of me by supporting my application for higher education. However, that October I began life as a student with characters such as John Beatty who, at the time, only had a Box Brownie, and an ex-Swansea dustman who climbed under the name of Mike Sharp. Mike only had two shirts and wore them continually on alternate days in an attempt to convince us that the other one was being washed. Mike's most recent claim to fame was when he appeared in Michael Palin's *Pole to Pole* as the Antarctic base camp manager.

Climbing was the main focus of our attention, with scholarly activities well down on our list of priorities. The handy student accommodation also attracted others from afar, such as the Burgess twins who were constantly found in the female halls of residence and Cliff Phillips who attained the status of superhero when he fell off Dinas Mot on one of his soloing expeditions and crawled down to the road in a very smashed up condition. After a short spell of compulsory mending he shot off to the Alps and took part in that well known Eiger film with Pete Minks, Eric Jones and Leo Dickinson, where he fell off again. We watched the first showing of that film, with Cliff, in a flat in Menai Bridge, and his eyes lit up when he watched himself hurtling to destruction before he finally braked on the edge of the second icefield. I am still convinced he left it until the last minute for the sake of the film!

My first Alpine season, in 1974, was noted for its lack of climbing. Having arrived in Arolla we went off to do the Dent de Tsalion as a warm up. John Beatty had also arrived but unfortunately his gear had not – Geneva airport were most apologetic but could shed no light on its whereabouts. After a few nights shivering in a duvet and the odd climb with borrowed gear he finally went home to get warm. Next on the list was the N face of the Pigne. After a very cramped bivvy below the Louettes Econdoué ridge with four of us in a tiny bivvy tent, I staggered up to the snow shoulder at 3295m and promptly threw up. My climbing partner was disgusted, not with the unsavoury pile of vomit but with my suggestion that we go down. It was two years before I returned to complete the climb; the pile of vomit had disappeared but I recalled the look on Barry's face quite vividly.

It took a second visit to the Matterhorn to complete the Hörnli ridge solo. That same Alpine season we had moved from Arolla to Zermatt, waiting until it was dark before we drove like madmen up to the campsite in my old MG Magnette, threw all the gear out and abandoned the car in the car-park. It collected several threatening letters before we stole away again under the cover of darkness. Barry and Greg Smith had gone off to do the Zmutt while I wandered up to the Hörnli hut and bivvied below the start of the climb. Following the first party, I overtook them after an hour of listening to the American telling a blonde Barbie Doll what an easy route it was. I stopped at the Solvay in the face of gathering cloud. Several other ropes had appeared, including the Americans, and were clearly thinking the same - time to beat a quick retreat. Barbie Doll was keen to reach the top and they vanished into the gloom. A German climber and I teamed up for a quick roped descent which turned out to be a slow one amid all the congestion lower down. While still at the Hörnli hut that evening we discovered that two American climbers had fallen down the E face. I never did find out if it was Barbie and her companion.

The next time I found myself at the Solvay it was late in the season, the sky was clear and, although the route had been a bit crowded, above the shoulder there was only me. I stood on the top alone.

My first visit to Chamonix was more of a pilgrimage than a holiday. I had read *The Hard Years* so many times that the cover had fallen off. The

place was everything I had expected it to be except the Mer de Glace, which was much longer. I had teamed up with a friend from the South East Essex Climbing Club and after doing the obligatory rock routes that the Brits tend to start on, we headed off to greater glory on the Frendo Spur, mainly because it didn't look too far from the campsite! We walked up to the Plan de l'Aiguille to save money, which was the first mistake, and arrived at the bivvy site on the Spur a bit late to grab a good spot. After a poor night shivering in duvets we got onto the ice crest feeling a bit jaded even before we started. There were two ropes ahead of us until the leader of the nearest fell off and slithered past us, while his second screamed at him in Italian. The flying Italian climber reappeared behind us and asked if they could join ropes with us. It might improve my Italian, I reflected, as I accepted their rope and watched Alan's face crumple with disbelief. 'It won't slow us down much and anyway we're quite near the top,' I argued. Second mistake. I thought we were slow but these two were winning awards for the slowest ascent of the decade. 'Get rid of them,' snarled Alan who was becoming fed up with our new-found friends. My gesture to untie their rope threw them into a fit of panic which rather confirmed my impression that they were very much out of their depth on the route. By now the other rope had vanished. 'Probably near the top and within sight of an expensive French beer,' I heard Alan muttering darkly. A second bivvy at the Midi was looking a strong possibility after a long delay waiting for one of the Italians to retrieve a crampon. I thought of untying and making a run for it but finally we got going again. Near the top we heard shouts in English: our epic had been watched with interest from below and two clubmates were descending from the Midi-Plan ridge to see if we were still alive. They took over the job of escorting the Italian lads to the Midi station and left us to complete the route. Completely knackered, we slumped in a tangled heap of gear amongst the ogling tourists and promptly fell asleep until the others joined us. We caught the last cable-car down, and the next day Juliano and his friend met us in the National for a drink and proudly explained that they were the first climbers in their club to climb the Frendo.

It was 16 years before I was in Chamonix again. This time my partner was a lanky 15-year-old who called me Dad. The place had changed – it was always overcrowded, but this ... ! Even the National had fallen victim and become trendy. A lot of climbs had taken place since the Frendo episode; Alan had died in the Hindu Kush, and yet here I was starting all over again with the next generation.

We decided to warm up on the Petite Verte. We had been warned that the route would be a little crowded – there was even a hint in the guidebook that the climb might occasionally be *unbelievably crowded*, adding that *the more romantic Alpinists will attempt an overnight bivouac in order to avoid the rush ...* 'You've got to be joking,' I muttered, 'it can't be that bad.'

Having arrived at the Grands Montets in time to catch the 7.15am cable-car, I was smugly delighted to see only a handful of climbers hovering about with intent – indeed there was even space enough inside to hold a

conversation without being squeezed senseless against the perspex. It's almost impossible to see anything through those scratched panels that masquerade as windows, but at least there was room to look at the blurred panorama that was unfolding below us.

After clanging down the steps at the top station to the glacier below, I noted with some satisfaction that most of the contents of the cable-car were vanishing in the direction of the Argentière hut. There were only three parties roping up now and I looked forward to a quiet ascent and being back in the valley for a lunchtime beer or three. This dream was rapidly shattered with the arrival of the second and then, shortly afterwards, the third cable-car, both of which had obviously been crammed to the gunwales with the Petite Verte fan club.

This was Richard's second Alpine mixed route so we were certainly not going to be the fastest party on the grid. Sure enough, by the time we reached the shoulder to gaze across into the *niche* of the N face of the Petit Dru, we had been overtaken several times. However, refusing to be hurried with a novice on the rope, we traversed onto the direct route and allowed the traffic jam to inch its way up the ridge above us. Big mistake this. We were now showered with lumps of ice and the occasional brick from the now nose-to-tail queue building up from the summit rocks almost down to the shoulder! We traversed further over towards the NE ridge wishing we had taken the trouble to climb the Camère-Chevalier couloir instead. At least we were on our own now and enjoying the steep snow slope that led directly to the already crowded summit. Mistake number two. Suddenly a shout from above us and a prickly sensation on the back of my neck warned us of impending doom. A washing machine sized lump of instant death was bounding down from the summit pile and heading straight for a rope of three climbers some 200ft below us. With horror, every climber on the ridge watched them fail to respond to the chorus of shouts and yells from above them. Just at the point when we all thought we were about to watch something quite appalling, the last guy on the rope looked up and threw himself to one side with a spectacular dive that dragged the other two out of the firing line. The hiss of relief from the spectators was quite audible. The boulder must have missed him by inches and flashed off down towards Argentière – probably to land on our car in the Montets car-park, was the comment from Richard. The whole place was becoming rather dodgy and here and there helmets were being dredged up from the bottom of sacks and hastily buckled on in the hope that the next rock would be a little smaller. The problem was that there were so many climbers on the route that it was almost impossible not to dislodge loose rock and ice. Arriving at the summit was rather like reaching the checkout in a supermarket in Chamonix – a mixture of relief and foreboding. We pushed our way through and past various parties and cramponed our way over thrutching bodies, weaving intricate patterns with the myriad of ropes lying about until, ten feet from the top, we gave in to market forces. 'Sod this,' said a disgruntled 15-year-old, 'Let's go down.'

I looked up at the ten or so bodies cluttering up the small space that was the top and followed him down. What a contrast to the previous week when three of us, including Richard, had climbed the N face of the Pic La Grave in the Ecrins, and had traversed the whole mountain in almost total isolation. We had sat for some time on the summit watching Mont Blanc and the Grandes Jorasses slowly vanish behind cloud – a perfect introduction to Alpine climbing.

However, back on the Verte, dodging the airborne ice, we descended the NW ridge past increasing numbers of ascending ropes, including one rope of rather overweight Brits who thought they were on the way to the Argentière hut! In the circumstances, this was an almost understandable mistake.

A year later, after a superb day on the Grands Montets ridge with Richard, we finally arrived back on the Argentière glacier and headed down through that bouldery mass of glacial chaos that always manages to sap the last of your strength. Unexpectedly I found myself in the unfamiliar position of trailing behind after the first of the fixed ladders and, to my horror, as hard as I tried to move ahead of him, I was unable to match his speed and agility. I finally arrived at the cable-car some five minutes behind him. It had finally happened. 'Never mind Dad, you didn't do too badly.'

I looked across at his grinning face, my feelings in a confused jumble of envy and pleasure. Envy because he had it all before him, just as I had 25 years previously, and pleasure because I still had time ahead of me to share some of it with him. The doors of the cable-car clattered open and we headed off towards the valley and a beer or two.