

## Chapter Nine

# Making the Call

There are times in the hills when a group or individuals make decisions that can bite. The following is a representative range of such calls I have experienced, along with their outcomes.

One weekend my OTMC party had been held up a good half day at our river crossing point in the East Eglinton River. This was upstream of our transport drop-off in the main Eglinton Valley. The river was steadily dropping but the lighting was making the crossing point run-out unpredictable. Then the lighting improved. What should we do? Was the party fit enough? Were the logistics of getting to our distant Mararoa Valley pick-up worse than finding our way back by our inward route? There were no mobile communications in 1982. The call was to go for it. Multiple passes and, on a flat map, thirty-five crow-kilometres. We continued steadily onward for the remainder of the day. Fifty-five minutes solid go; five minutes food stop; fifty-five minutes go; five minutes food. We just got to the transport as it arrived. Must admit it was quite exhilarating.



Today a bridge spans the lower Beans Burn gorge. In 1964 it was a risky ford so our six person party decided to do a full roped crossing rather than using mutual support. Half the party was across when a member lost her nerve. We were lucky to retrieve her as a party member had mistakenly made the call to attach a rope-end to the river bank so that those already across were unable to pendulum her in. The end result was a near drowning, the loss of 40 metres of rope, a lost ice axe, loss of glasses, sodden gear and a semi-conscious woman. Once all across the river we put in an emergency camp. After a day's observation we decided that our lady was up to safely continuing our Olivines trip. For my brother Bruce and I it was quite an introduction to serious mountain travel.

Henry Stoddart leading the way. *BJM*



Emergency camp  
in the lower  
Beans Burn  
Gorge KDM

Roped river crossings are a mountaineering technique and should be avoided by those with only tramping skills. Everything has to be pre-planned especially as to who, at what point, takes responsibility for the person in the middle of a noisy river. A good run-out is needed so you can pendulum a person to the bank.

Choosing a swimming pendulum rather than risking a foot crossing of the Perth River allowed us to do a complete traverse of the Garden of Eden Ice Plateau.





Getting our gear across the Perth River *KDM*

I thought one of our six was just testing the discoloured Landsborough River during Xmas 1988-89. Suddenly he chose to make a dash for the far bank. We held our breath when he was tumbled by the current. Somehow he stumbled out on the far side. Guess who had the tent and radio? A split party is a serious situation. Further upstream I felled a beech sapling. We needed a really dependable pole for five to link arms on. By slowly side-stepping downstream we used the current to push us safely to the far bank.

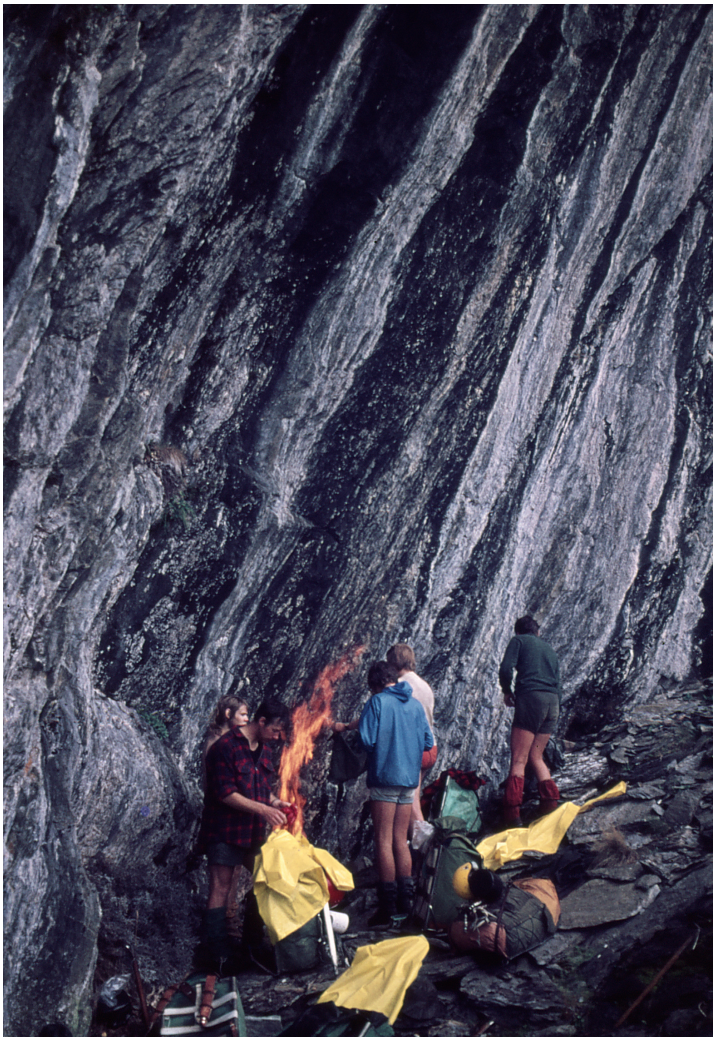
I began to realise that the trip leader was out of his depth. Two of the party were friends who knew my background. The others had little experience but knew the leader. Upstream we reached Zora Creek, a glacial-fed stream with no safe run-out. I had been here before. The rain was intensifying and the stream was rising rapidly. A heated argument broke out when I refused to attempt the crossing. We retreated to our earlier campsite only 20 minutes away to find it cut off by an uncrossable torrent. My point had been made. I had to take charge to get this party safely out of the Landsborough. From now on we traveled together but as two groups each not talking to the other. We only joined for support on river crossings. Our escape was to be by crossing the Solution Range to the Otoko. I had earlier found the Otoko true right bank out to the West Coast highway navigable in marginal conditions.

We crossed the range in fine weather. The magnificent Mt Hooker was in perfect condition and mocking me. I had previously spent a total of a month trying to climb it. When the highway bridge was sighted two party members broke into a run to gain its security. The Landsborough country had freaked them out.

On our 'escape' the Otoko River was low so we avoided hairy crossings of side-valley canyons as on a previous retreat *KDM*



Drying out on an earlier retreat from Mt Hooker *KDM*



This was not the first or last time I had to be the unpopular one prepared to make the call for the safety of others. Some men, and the rare woman, seem of need to go through a 'gung-ho' phase in the mountains. This usually results in a lack of people prepared to go with them again, or a death. I've been quietly thanked afterwards on a number of occasions.



The Andy icefall flows from the Olivine Ice Plateau and feeds the Williamson River. Taken from Holloway *KDM*

A split party horror scenario occurred when descending the Williamson River from the Olivine Ice Plateau to the Arawhata. During a food break one of the party suddenly appeared on the other bank of the melt-inflated Williamson. We instructed him to carry on down his side while we packed his gear down to the Arawhata confluence where we could cross to him in the morning when the river would drop. After the rest of the party descended a distance, he suddenly appeared back with us. Somehow he had jumped boulder to boulder with his clothes in a plastic bag clutched in his teeth!

I was so angry with him for the predicament he had placed the party in that I was speechless. Another party member had to deliver the lecture.



The settled fine weather allowed us to erect a bush tent on the main divide at Whitbourn Saddle. Poles were carried up the Snow White Glacier from the Arawhata Valley *KDM*

The Olivines and its Ice Plateau are a favourite area for me. Weather certainly rules. On a twenty-four day traverse twelve of our days were largely untravellable. In contrast, on a two week trip we had no rain and continuously dry feet thanks to a natural bridge across the Joe River tributary of the Arawhata, and a natural bridge over the Dart River after an alpine crossing of Whitbourn Saddle.



Travelling up the Snow White Glacier (Bruce, Chris) KDM

My brother Bruce and I took part in the Otago Tramping Club's famous Milford Track Freedom Walk in 1965. The Tourist Hotel Corporation was intent on keeping us out of their privatised domain. Therefore use of their boat to cross the Arthur River was out of bounds to us. Bush ingenuity took over. After finding two 44 gallon drums and constructing a raft our Milford Sound support team decided to swim the river with two joined climbing ropes before it rose. The Arthur was in flood when the main walkers arrived. The raft system could take either two packs plus operator or one passenger at a time. It took twelve hours to get nineteen of us across; some of us at night.

As junior members of the OTC Bruce and I tagged along on this protest action designed to secure freedom of entry to our national parks. All the organisation and political machinations, right up to departure time, were ably handled by the club leadership. This very successful example of challenging 'the authorities' has had a major influence on our subsequent involvement in outdoor affairs.