



To Bogong Summit.

H. S. Gibbs.

Bogong Misadventure

Mainly condensed from "Schuss" (Sept.-Oct., 1943)

There was considerable discussion in the Bivouac Hut, 4,800 feet up on the Staircase Spur to Mt. Bogong that August morning. It was a Monday. It was snowing outside. Visibility was bad. What was the weather going to be like on the top? Like any other ski-ing party, number one topic of conversation was the weather.

Cleve Cole Hut was the objective. Six of the party had had a fortnight's food packed up there before the winter. Two others, making 8 in all, had joined the party on the previous day, with food in their packs. Ian Lenne was the leader. He had had a fair amount of experience, including two previous winter trips to Bogong, also a summer one. With him there were his close friend, Ted Welch, and Jack Kelaher, both of whom had been on previous trips with him; Peggy Lenne (his wife), Mary Brown and Bob Moss, these last three making their first winter trip.

John McRae and Georgine Gadsden had joined them at Tawonga. These two and Miss Brown belonged to the S.C.V., the others to the U.S.C. McRae had spent the previous week at Buller. His experience including touring in New South Wales, but he was just making his acquaintance with Victoria. Georgine had skied in Switzerland, at Kosciusko and Hotham. She had had a week at Buller this season. She always carried excellent equipment. Strong, young adults, all members of the party were in first class health. A couple of weeks earlier McRae had said that he would see a doctor on his return, about a pain in the side, but no mention of it was made on the trip.

The morning wore on, but the weather got no better. Heavy rain had been falling when they left Tawonga the previous day. It had snowed heavily most of the way up the spur. There was deep snow around the hut. Not that they thought the weather in any way hazardous. But it was certainly uninviting. McRae had to return to Melbourne on Thursday. He was anxious to push on. Miss Gadsden was never inclined to be deterred by the weather. Lenne, with the responsibility of leading a party that included novices, was more cautious. Finally, he and Welch arranged that Welch would go ahead to guide McRae and Miss Gadsden, who had not made the trip before; and if they did not return shortly, Lenne would know that conditions were not too bad, and would follow with the rest. None of the three who were to go ahead was in the habit of lacking confidence. There was some joking in the hut before they left. A couple of cabbages were being thrown about in the hut. Somebody put one of them inside the flap of Welch's pack. At 12.30, after lunch, the three set off. They carried enough food for about 5 days.

Miss Gadsden's pack was about 33lbs., McRae's 40, and Welch's, 50lbs. They would climb the stiff mile and a half southerly to the Summit Hut (6,400ft.), reported not to be snowed under a week earlier, and they confidently hoped to continue on the further couple of miles across the summit to the Cleve Cole Hut (5,800ft.).

At 2.30, Lenne and the other four left to follow. At the top of the first climb of about 300 vertical feet, it was snowing heavily. A north-westerly was blowing; and the visibility was bad. They decided to return to the Bivouac Hut.

Next day, Tuesday, the five set out again—at 10 a.m. They walked, carrying their packs and skis. They hoped to get through to the Cole hut. The others should be comfortably there by now; or at least near it, if they had waited at the Summit Hut overnight. The weather was bad. It was snowing all the time, and windy. As they climbed, the wind got worse. So did the visibility, which shrank from 100 yards to 10 yards, sometimes less. It was tiring, heavy going. It was 4 o'clock before they reached a point just

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below Pollux. Lenne went ahead to reconnoitre. He went to the far side of Pollux, about 50 feet below its summit. It was hard to pick the route. There seemed to be cornices. The Summit Hut might easily be snowed under, or at least hard to find by now. It was getting late. They had better go back to the Bivouac. As they returned, their early tracks were snowed over. At 4.30 they found they were on the north-western, instead of the north-eastern face of the spur. They called a halt, and decided to make-do with any sheltered spot if they could not find the route soon. At 5.15 they found the route, and it was dark before they got back to the Bivouac Hut at 6.30, having parked their skis up the spur. All night it snowed heavily, adding 18 inches around the hut.

On Wednesday it snowed all day. The weather was no better. They were tired after the previous day. They decided to wait until the weather improved. (One of the severest days on record. See article "Season 1943"). On Thursday it was still snowing, but the wind had fallen. They would now go on to the Cleve Cole. They should meet Welch's party on the way down, for McRae had to be back in Tawonga that night.

Away at 9 a.m., by 11 they had reached their skis. These they carried up to the traverse around Pollux. Here, the new snow tended to slide off the icy under-surface when ski were edged. Visibility was bad, although occasional breaks in the fog gave an odd glance of the summit. On the far side of Pollux, the three novices waited while Lenne and Kelaher probed ahead. At about 1.30, Lenne and Kelaher located the first snow pole, in Gorge Gap. Here they found that Welch, McRae and Gadsden and left their skis—upright, heels well dug into the snow, a considerable amount of wind-blown ice accumulated on them—obviously there some time, probably since Monday. Welch's steel cables had been removed. Apparently the weather had been too bad for the trio to come back for them. Lenne and Kelaher reported back to their party, who then came on to the gap. While they had a spell, Lenne again probed forward. Visibility was still barely 10 yards. There was a mild wind. He told the others to follow carefully; the surface was nearly all ice. Nearing the fourth visible pole, there appeared to be some rocks near it. He could remember none there before. Closer, he was horrified to find the three bodies of his colleagues.

The accompanying picture, "To Bogong Summit," shows the last climb to Bogong, with Summit Hut marked by a circle. The bodies were near the bottom of the circle. It was in the saddle, Gorge Gap, 500 vertical feet below this that the ski were found. The picture, "Staircase Spur," looks west to Tawonga Valley. Summit Hut is at left edge of the picture; the two points on right are Castor and Pollux. From saddle in the centre, to the hut, is a climb of 500 vertical feet. Ski were left in this saddle. Bodies were found about 80 yards from the hut.

Welch lay face downwards, head about 3ft. west of the pole, feet down-hill. His pack was still on; the sleeping bag, out of its waterproof cover, protruded from the top. The top flap of the pack was fastened across the bag. His right hand clasped a stock. The other stock was near his left hand. On his right was an empty rum bottle, without a



After the Blizzard. H. S. Gibbs

cork, pointing down-hill. His face, buried in the ice, was not visible. Trousers, pack, and parts of the body were iced. A hood or cap covered his head.

Eight feet further up, slightly to the right, lay McRae, huddled against his pack. One stock was between his legs, grasped in his left hand, his foot against the bottom of it. The other stock was missing. His right hand held a small flask, stoppered, a small amount of brandy in it. His rucsac was still strapped to his back. His jacket hood was over his head, but was face was showing.

Four feet to the left, but further up the slope, Miss Gadsden lay on her back, leaning slightly towards McRae. The hood of her jacket was pulled up, leaving a small opening, showing her face, partly covered by a vizor. Her left arm reclined beside her, a ring on her finger showing clearly. Gravely, Lenne retraced his steps, to meet his party struggling up the slope. In horror, they all came on. Some averted their eyes. Others noted the details, including the ring on Miss Gadsden's finger; but no one touched the bodies. From the ice on them, it appeared that they must have been dead for some time.

Lenne could not find the Summit Hut, but wasted little time looking. They must return to Tawonga at once. It was 5 p.m. when they got back to the Bivouac Hut to spend an awful sleepless night. Leaving on Friday at 9 a.m., they reached Tawonga before three. Motored by Mr. Dick Hore, of the hotel, Lenne notified the police at Bogong. He rang Welch's parents in Melbourne, and amongst others, the chairman of the S.C.V. Huts and Trips Committee (Frank Gilbert), through whom he had booked the trip. Rapidly the message was relayed to members of the S.C.V. committee. Skiers in Melbourne offered help in recovering the bodies, if required.

Meantime, however, Lenne had arranged to lead the local police party back up the mountain, and had secured the assistance of Mr. W. Ryder, of Tawonga with horses. On Saturday, at 10.30 a.m., the party of 17 left. It included First-Constable Knowles, of Yackandandah, Constables Chapman (Dederang), and Woonton (Bogong), Messrs. Whitehead and Gardner, of the S.E.C. at Bogong, Mr. O'Connor, and about 10 residents of Bogong township, a number of them members of the Bogong Ski Club. Mr. Guy, the S.E.C. Engineer-in-Charge at the township, facilitated arrangements. There seemed little to do at the Melbourne end. But Melbourne was soon to be electrified with the news that the party had returned on Sunday night, having found only the bodies of the two men.

All day on Monday, S.C.V. officials discussed and re-discussed the possibilities, with only brief telephone reports on a faint line from Tawonga to guide them. On Monday evening, a meeting to which, amongst others, Kelaher was invited, decided unanimously that if there were only once chance in a million that Lenne and the others could have been mistaken about Miss Gadsden being dead, or having mistaken a snow-covered garment for her body, searchers must immediately be sent.

There followed urgent arranging of cars, petrol permits, leave of absence, postponement of personal engagements, collection of gear, fixing of picking-up points, and in a comparatively few hours, nearly a score from amongst the best skiers, drawn from the S.C.V. and the U.S.C., were on the way. Meantime, Eric Johnson and Sig Chapman, who were about to go to the Plains, made a fast trip from Tawonga to Cole Hut, in case Miss Gadsden should be there. On Monday night, at Bogong township, they reported a blank.

Inquests were held at Tawonga on Monday on Welch and McRae. The finding was "Misadventure." Death was ascribed to exposure. Constable Chapman's report of the position of the bodies and their gear on the spur confirmed Lenne's original description, except that by the time the police party had arrived, there had been a further covering of snow; and the third heap proved to be only a rucsac, with no sign of the girl's body. The other two bodies were frozen to the surface, the ice coming out only by force, and in solid blocks.

Next day, Tuesday, Lenne again returned to the mount, this time with Moss, Ryder, Mr. Dunlop, and the Coroner (Mr. Roper). That night in the Bivouac Hut, they were joined by the first of the S.C.V. parties—Fred Ewart, Harold Gibbs, Wal Johnson and Mick Hull. Secretary Cartledge remained in Tawonga to maintain communications. Wednesday saw much digging around the spot where the bodies had lain to find only McRae's second stock and a torch still holding current (suggesting that darkness had overtaken the ill-fated skiers). It was shortly after midday when Harold Gibbs, making a survey of the top of the Doorway Creek gorge, sloping steeply to the west, discovered the body of Miss Gadsden about 450 vertical feet down the gully. The body, upper part covered in snow, was on its back, feet together and downhill, both hands in front of the hips, no gloves, the ring that showed clearly confirming Lenne's original description. Ewart and Lenne came down, cutting steps in places, and corroborated the details.

Miss Gadsden's body was found down the gully to the right, just at the extreme edge of the picture "To Bogong Summit." It was blown into the gully at the back of the picture of "Staircase Spur." "After the Blizzard" shows rime indicating the weather conditions.

Puzzling feature was that the inclines seemed to be slightly against the body reaching the position from where it had lain nearly a week earlier. Detailed reports in "Schuss" (Sept.-Oct., 1943) suggest that it probably moved in two or possibly three separate slides on different occasions. That it moved up a slightly inclined course at the outset could well be due to the terrific gusts and whirls that abound on that exposed ridge. It was not

anchored by a pack like the other two. On part of its path, about mid-way, a track some 18 inches wide and 3 inches deep still showed when the body was found.

Gibbs and Johnson remained at the Summit Hut that night, and before dark had raised the body some distance and secured it. Meantime about a dozen more from the Melbourne parties had arrived at the Bivouac; and next day the body was recovered and taken to Tawonga. The inquest was opened that night and completed next day, again returning a finding of "Misadventure."

Exactly what happened on that first Monday, August 2, 1943, will never be known. Exhaustive enquiries were made by the S.C.V. Committee into every angle that could be thought of. Many questions will never be solved. If overcome by exhaustion in the battle against the elements, why had the unfortunate skiers made no attempt to lighten their packs? The cabbage still in Welch's pack is important evidence that no such attempt was made. Why did the men not remove their packs if they were waiting, or in need of a spell? If the Summit Hut could not be found—the bodies were at the last visible snow pole, only 80 yards from it, although it was probably pretty well snowed under—why had no attempt been made to get into a less exposed position? Or, if fear of cornices was against moving, why no attempt to extract more protection from the contents of the packs? Leaving the skis in the Gorge Gap suggests that they thought of staying in the Summit Hut. Was all well up till then, or had they already been delayed by some detour or side-slip? Were they still confident—the full packs suggest so—or did they think going on was the lesser task?

It seems that whatever happened must have occurred suddenly. Had the girl collapsed, the two men would probably have removed their packs while they lent assistance. This makes it likely that the opposite was the case—that she went to their assistance. None of the three was addicted to alcohol. Miss Gadsden was a total abstainer. It is possible that Miss Gadsden returned from searching for the hut to find that the other two had fallen asleep from exhaustion, perhaps, even despair. She alone had her gloves off.

Some attempt had been made to get the men's sleeping-bags out—either by her or by each other, as their packs on their backs were hardly accessible to themselves. Whether fingers became too numb or buckles too iced up for further access is unknown, but the stimulants had been got out; also, at some stage, the torch.

Any cause for a sudden collapse is equally obscure. Although there were no marks to suggest lightning, University authorities considered it a possibility. They discounted static electricity. The S.C.V. could find no record of snow particles inhaled into the lungs causing a tragedy such as this; nor was there any evidence to suggest food poisoning (other members of the party had had the same food). No autopsies were held, so direct evidence of internal conditions is lacking. While University authorities said that behaviour of lightning was unpredictable, and could offer no suggestions to lessen the risk of it, they gave a warning about another possibility.

"It is considered possible that a small quantity of alcohol taken under the conditions described could cause complete collapse. Except under safe conditions, the use of alcohol should be regarded as dangerous, and in conditions of extreme cold and fatigue, the taking of a quantity as small as half an ounce might have fatal results," said the Professor of Physiology (Dr. R. D. Wright).

In commending this warning to the attention of all skiers, the committee of the S.C.V. repeats some others which cannot be stated too often: Start early. Remember the weather any change. Do not set out if there may be a risk. Return to shelter in time. Avoid being caught by darkness. Don't leave gloves off unduly; frost-bite is quick. In a crisis, get out of the wind. Go for help in time. Include more than one who knows the route. The best bushman is no bushman in fog. Study the literature on a locality before beginning. Don't sit or lie down in bad weather. Be well clad. If a body should be found, make a close physical examination; secure it before leaving.

As to the approach to Mt. Bogong, Malcolm McColl in 1936 (Feb. "Schuss") before Bogong was opened up to skiers, described the last 400 feet or so of the Staircase as definitely dangerous in an average winter, particularly for inexperienced skiers; alright with fine weather and good conditions, but miscalculation as to time and weather might introduce a complete change.

Eighteen months later, Roy Weston wrote ("Schuss," July, 1937) that circumstances which might deny the summit to the climber might be rare, but if snow-poles engendered the belief that it was plain ski-ing they would be better not there. After certain winds, a cornice fringing the summit brow might bar upward progress while icy sides prevented a flanking movement. A better approach was wanted.

The S.C.V. Committee's report sums up: "Winter ascent of Mt. Bogong is a strenuous trip. In bad conditions it can involve un contemplated hazards which constitute a positive danger." The Committee is working now on proposals for an improved approach.

The Committee was unanimous that this latest misadventure—as with the death of Cleve Cole after exposure on another part of Mt. Bogong in August, 1936 ("Schuss," Sept. 1936)—was due to a combination of adverse circumstances rarely to be found all present together.