

I beamed at Alan in relief, but even with the good news, he seemed distant and reserved as he quietly sat, reading his book. After a brief conference, we decided to wake at midnight and if the weather looked manageable, we'd launch our summit attempt.

This time, we ignored the dehydrated gunk and reverted to our favourite pasta with sausages, tomato, and vegetables for dinner, and prepared our gear for the next morning. I felt wired up, anxious about the amount of snow that had fallen during the storm and the subsequent avalanche threat. But it was risk we'd have to take. If we did not attempt tomorrow, the following day's weather could worsen and we might get stuck for days – time we did not have.

That evening before bed, I took out my satellite phone and attempted to call Stephanie in Singapore. I had checked the battery in the lodge before leaving, but in the freezing conditions at Plateau Hut, it had gone from full to empty, unable to even power up. Like the calm, controlled person I am, I reacted to this discovery with a bout of barely controlled fury. I could not believe I would not be able to speak to her before making the summit attempt the next morning. An instant later, my fiery anger had dissolved into crippling doubt and I suddenly felt cut-off and isolated from the world. It didn't help that Alan had withdrawn into himself, acting depressed and subdued despite being so close to the finish line. Inexplicable as it seemed, the next morning, I discovered the cause of his complaint.

DAY TWENTY-TWO

We had set our alarms for midnight but I was so incredibly wound up I hardly slept a wink, looking at my watch every five minutes

until I finally hauled myself out of my sleeping bag at 11.45 p.m. The list of things I needed to prepare had been replayed in my mind so many times that it seemed tattooed across the back of my eyes. The first step was a visit to the toilet; I certainly didn't want a repeat of the Mt Ruapehu fiasco.

While outside, I noticed two things. Firstly, the wind had died down completely; in fact, there was no wind at all. And secondly, the snow felt firm and crunchy underfoot, meaning there had been a good freeze. Both were encouraging signs.

Alan grimaced at the steaming bowl of porridge I offered, saying he wanted to stick to Weet-Bix instead. Quiet and withdrawn as he had been the night before, I could tell something wasn't right but I knew better than to badger him about it.

By 1 a.m., Day 22 had officially begun as we stood outside the hut, crampons on, roped up, and ready to go. Without any discussion, Alan set off in the lead, down across the Grand Plateau. The three-quarter moon was hidden behind the enormous western ridge of Malte Brun, so we navigated by the light of our head torches. It was very cold but this meant a hard, frozen walking surface, and we made great time as we crunched our way across. I looked at my watch as we arrived at the opposite side of the Grand Plateau. It had only taken us 18 minutes to cover. Superb timing! *At this rate, we're well on our way to achieving a very fast trip to the summit and back, I thought.*

Unfortunately, I was about to be proven wrong.

We were the only climbers on Mt Cook that day and the tracks of teams who'd gone before had been wiped out by the snow of the previous day. This meant that we had to set out route-finding, as we slowly navigated our way through the maze of huge crevasses criss-

crossing the lower Linda Glacier. Time after time, we came across massive fissures, wider than two cars' length and deeper than our head torches could penetrate. Scanning left and right, we looked for possible snow bridges to cross, but were often unable to find one, forcing us to set off in one direction in search of a suitable crossing point. Sometimes, we'd walk a few hundred metres and, dejected, turn to backtrack up the way we'd come. It soon became obvious that this was not going to be the fast ascent I had envisaged.

At one point, an extensive search led to nothing more than a very thin, vertical "fin" of snow, diagonally crossing an enormous crevasse. We needed to climb across this and resorted to belaying one another over the perilous drop. As I slowly climbed on the points of my crampons and ice tools, I peered into the blackened depths and shivered, praying that the snow would not collapse and send me hurtling down into an icy tomb.

After an hour of frustrating zig-zags, Alan stopped. "I'm going to need a toilet break," he said apologetically.

"No worries, Al" I replied, in a poor attempt at masking my frustration. Time was slipping away from us and soon, the sun would be up, melting the ground beneath our feet.

I stood and stared into the sky that was absolutely still and silent above me. The stars twinkled and danced, and the Milky Way streaked across, as if painted by the sweep of God's brush. The silhouettes of New Zealand's highest peaks encircled me and in that moment of perspective, I overcame the frustrations of the past hour. Alan and I were the only two people in the world lucky enough to be witnessing the spectacular vision wrapped around us. It was awe-inspiring and so all petty considerations fell away without another thought.

One earthly distraction that proved harder to ignore was the aching cold that had seeped into my body as a result of standing still. I dropped my pack and pulled out an extra jacket, then put my shell on over my trousers and added an extra set of gloves. When ready, we set off again with Alan leading. Fortunately, the route-finding proved slightly easier, but as we got higher up the Linda Glacier, snow conditions worsened. What had been hard, crunchy snow became soft and Alan had to resort to kicking steps.

The morning wore on and the temperature continued to drop. Even with my extra layers, the slow pace was not enough to warm me and I started shivering uncontrollably. When the sun's golden rays began to peak over the horizon at 4 a.m., I was close to being frozen, but had also noticed a change in Alan. For every two steps, he was forced to stop for a short rest, but I didn't think we had been climbing long enough for this usually fit and strong "hard man" to be this tired. I knew there had to be some reason for his diminished pace but I wasn't sure what it could be.

"Are you OK, Al? Want me to lead for a while?"

"No, I'm fine," he muttered, sounding as if he were about to drop dead on the spot.

"I'm bloody freezing, mate," I added, rather insensitively. "Can we pick up the pace a bit?"

"I'm sick as a dog, Grant. There's something wrong with my guts, this is as fast as I can go," he snapped.

Alan is one of those men who could have his arm bitten off by a shark and complain in the same way someone might mention a broken nail. For him to admit he wasn't feeling well was akin to announcing a terminal diagnosis and the news made my heart sink as it seriously affected our chances of summiting. Suddenly, his

odd behaviour over the past 24-hours made sense. What I couldn't understand, however, was why he persisted in assuming the lead. Yes, my steps resembled a stoned duck, but at least I was feeling fit and strong. If we were going to climb Mt Cook and descend safely, he would require all the dwindling energy he had left.

Damn this, I thought angrily to myself. If he doesn't want me to lead, I'll just ignore him and stomp straight past – which was exactly what I did.

With me in front, we immediately increased our speed and I welcomed the added workload which was quickly warming me up again. As we reached the avalanche debris, signalling the bottom of the Gun Barrels, Alan shook his head. "Looks fresh."

It did, probably from within the last day. It was 5 a.m., still dark and cold enough to ensure the avalanche risk was low, for now. The conditions later in the day would be another case entirely. *Just focus on the job at hand*, I thought, pushing the creeping fear back into its corner.

We climbed over a steep, small crevasse that granted access to the Linda Shelf, having to make a rising traverse for a few hundred metres. I was dreading this part of the climb and the large drop-off that awaited a slip. I started kicking steps into the snow and was initially relieved to find it soft, yet firm enough to form a solid hold. Unfortunately, however, it wasn't long before it turned to hardened ice. As we progressed higher, crampon point by crampon point, pick by pick, the ice shelf steepened and the snow became soft again. I chose a line which was much higher and steeper than we probably needed, as it appeared the most direct route. I had an exhausting time for the last 30 minutes, wallowing and stamping through the deep drift, while trying to form decent steps for Alan to follow.

Finally, we made it to the bergschrund, or crevasse, that marked the gully we would climb to access the summit rocks.

I was feeling completely knackered after leading for two hours, and well in need of a break. When Alan finally reached the bergschrund, he looked miserable and I could see how much the stomach bug was wearing him down. Stopping about 10m from me, I watched in concerned silence as he clamped his hands under his armpits, groaning in discomfit. They'd become frozen on the traverse and he was now suffering the very painful, but necessary, process of re-warming them.

Even when fit and strong, climbing Mt Cook is an exhausting experience. Hundreds of things can go wrong and the journey requires maximum concentration and focus at all times. Only now were we beginning the steepest section of the summit rocks and I failed to see how Alan could manage it in his condition, never mind



Alan rewarming his frozen hands on the Linda Shelf.

the summit ridge and our descent all the way back down again. But offering to turn back was a futile exercise. We both knew Alan's last possible step would be towards his goal, not away from it.

After Alan had re-warmed his hands, we set up a belay. I led the first pitch by climbing up the gully to an old sling attached to a crack in the rocks, shouting to Alan that I was safe and that he could start climbing. A moment later, he shook his head.

"Sorry, mate. I need another toilet stop," he called weakly from below.

My heart dropped as I stood awkwardly on my crampon points, sure that the climb was over. We were moving too slowly and the sun would soon be too high to complete the journey safely.

I looked up to the summit rocks above me. After 1,300km of walking, paddling, and pedalling, we had failed just 400 vertical metres below our final destination. A team is only as strong as its weakest member and instead of a rogue wave, avalanche or crevasse, we'd been defeated by a stomach bug too small to see. *We did our best*, I consoled myself, imagining the dejected walk back to Plateau Hut. The weather forecast for the following days was bad, so turning back now meant the end of the expedition.

I didn't feel angry, only very resigned and sad.

Alan slowly packed his gear and climbed up to me on his front points. When he reached the belay station, I told him that I thought it best we turn back. As much as I wanted to reach that peak, I knew it wasn't worth the risk.

Instead of collapsing in relief, Alan looked at me as if I'd grown a second head. "I've made the summit before at 1 p.m., Grant. Let's keep going and see how we go."

Knowing Alan, I should not have been surprised with his reply, but given the fact that his face was as white as the snow around him, I could only imagine what he was going through. Extremely dubious that we would make it, I faced the reality that from here on, I would need to lead. I knew the route up through the summit rocks, particularly one hard, vertical section called Spaghetti Junction, which scared the crap out of me.

"OK, let's go!" I said with all the fake bravado I could muster. After a quick swapping around of positions, with Alan moving into the belay spot, I set off up the steep gully for another rope length until I found the next sling hanging out of the ice. I set up the belay and called for Alan to start climbing. As he came slowly tip-tapping his way up to me, I watched intently to gauge his strength. Reaching me, he took a quiet look at the sling I was attached to and said, "OK, Grant. I guess I'll keep on slowly up." It was music to my ears and I watched him pass me and climb higher up the gully, until he reached the very base of the summit rocks. As long as he could keep making upwards progress, I knew there was still a chance we could eventually get there. And as an extra bonus, I realised the sequence of our climbing now meant Alan was in position to lead. Yes, I preferred to push a sick man to the front, than risk becoming another meat ball at the base of Spaghetti Junction. So sue me.

And so, we continued climbing up through the summit rocks, sharing leads, rope length by rope length. The sun shone brightly and it appeared a glorious day with very little wind up high, as opposed to the forecast prediction of 70km/h winds at 3,300m. With everything seemingly against us, at least we didn't have to battle the weather gods as well.

We soon reached Spaghetti Junction, about a third of the way up the rocks and so named because of the large number of different coloured slings left there over the years. The next five vertical metres were the crux (or hardest part) of the rock climb, with a very exposed vertical bulge to traverse, then ascend. The bulge makes for great photo opportunities as the belayer is tucked in beside the rock and the climber has to traverse out to this very airy position adjacent to the belay station, with hundreds of metres of exposure. This was the section I was secretly glad Alan was going to lead. I carefully snapped some photos as he slowly and methodically worked his way up. Even when sick, it is a joy to watch Alan climb. Years of experience and training have allowed him to make difficult moves with ease. He never seemed to struggle or be at the limit of his control.

After he shouted from above that he was safe and I was on the belay, I set out to follow him up. I suffered a heart-stopping moment as I stepped out into the abyss, hoping the front teeth of my crampons would bite into the small patch of ice plastered on the rock ledge. I have much shorter legs than Alan and repeating his moves was a frequent reminder of this fact. I focussed completely on the climbing and kept reminding myself not to look down.

Upon arriving at the top of the summit rocks, we discovered that instead of firm snow, ideal for kicking steps, we were faced with jagged *sastrugi* (wind-blown forms of ice) forming the summit ridge.

"Ahhhh!" I growled to nobody in particular, as I realised the mountain was going to make us work all the way to the top.

When iced up, the summit ridge requires some serious attention. It has a vertical drop to the left of over 1,000m and a steep sloping slide of about 500m to the right. Neither option was particularly appealing. We had hoped to un-rope here and kick secured steps.

However, the hard ice forced us to continue belaying each other as we climbed higher.

Reaching the final bergschrund before the summit ice cap, I was starting to feel very tired. At around 3,650m elevation, the air is thin enough to affect the breathing of most climbers. In my tired state, the summit 100m above seemed impossibly far. Sensing my concern, Alan spoke quietly, but with complete conviction.

"Well done, Grant. We are going to make it now, you know." If there was ever a moment to illustrate the enigma that is Alan Silva, it was then. Sick and exhausted himself, he hadn't complained once. He put his head down and climbed a mountain, when most people wouldn't even be able to leave their bed. Upon seeing me – the fit one in the team – suffering self-doubt, he swallowed his discomfit and delivered the words of encouragement he knew I needed to hear.

In the lead again, I set off and slowly started up the final summit slopes. *Kick-kick* with my boots, *tap-tap* with my axes, again and again. I thought I could glimpse the summit just above me and looked down to see Alan attached to the rope directly below my legs. I was about to yell out to him that we had arrived, but something stopped me. I climbed a few more steps and to my despair, realised it wasn't the peak after all. Rather, it was a tricky little bit of jutting snow, a false summit, placed there by God to break the hearts of weary climbers.

I kept on going until finally, I was 100 per cent sure the summit was just a few metres above – I could even see the south ridge leading off to the left. It was the first moment on the whole Peak-to-Peak trip that I knew with certainty we were going to complete the expedition and I took out my video camera as words of relief and happiness poured from my chest.

"After 22 days and 1,300km... I can't believe it, there is the summit of Aoraki, Mt Cook, only 7m above my head." Hands trembling, I shut off the device and kicked up the last few steps, finally collapsing upon the very tip. I felt completely and utterly spent.

As Alan approached, I filmed him making the final steps.

"And here, we have Mr Alan Silva making a bit of history. The first person to ever climb Mt Cook, all the way from the summit of Mt Ruapehu."

And with that, Alan smiled into the camera and waved in triumph.

To this day, it remains my favourite image of our entire trip. Only I knew how hard this tough, down-to-earth but gentle Australian had worked to make it. He deserved it more than anyone and I was immensely appreciative and extremely proud of him for refusing to give up.



An unwell but smiling Alan on the summit of Aoraki/Mt Cook.



A DICEY DESCENT

Reaching the summit of any mountain is a short-lived celebration because you still have to get down again. The descent is when 80 per cent of accidents occur and I was acutely aware of this as I tried to regain my strength. Yet, I also wanted to savour my time up at the highest point of my homeland. I had decided that this would be the last time I climbed Mt Cook. Three attempts had led to two successes and the mountain felt too dangerous for my liking. It was an accident waiting to happen and the more I returned, the greater the chance of something going wrong.

My first summit in 2009 had been slightly disappointing. Over the years I had sat at Mt Cook Village countless times, staring up at the summit and dreaming of the moment I would stand upon it to look out at the world. However, when I'd finally reached the very top,

I looked around and saw... nothing. Thick clouds had descended, blanketing the landscape in every direction.

Today, I could see for miles. The west and east coasts of New Zealand stretched out to the horizon and 1,700m below, I could make out the tiny red dot that was Plateau Hut. I could also see far out to the north and south, a truly incredible spectacle. We took photos and I had a small drink, followed by my second jet plane sweet for the day. Pulling out the camera, I began to film a short message to Stephanie, thanking her for her support and announcing that I had officially made my last summit of Mt Cook, but my voice broke and I became too emotional to continue. The previous night, I had been unable to speak to her on the satellite phone and couldn't help but think of what it would be like for her if something happened to me. Gone, without that last chance to speak to one another.

"What do you want to do?" asked Alan, snapping me out of my romantic musings.

"Get off this mountain alive," I replied, standing up and preparing. Alan set off down first and as the rope came tight, I took one last look at the summit, saying a quiet farewell under my breath. It was a sad moment, like leaving a special friend I knew I'd never see again.

When we reached the bergschrund, the slope eased off and we were able to turn away and walk carefully down the summit ridge. Roped together, I looked down on the east ridge of Mt Dixon across the opposite side of the Grand Plateau. I could make out the exact point where Alan had fallen the previous year, almost dragging both of us to our deaths. It sent a shiver down my spine, but served to intensify my focus and concentration. We made good time until we reached two steep, icy sections leading down to the top of the

summit rocks, where we carefully set up a belay and down climbed the hard ice. It was with incredible relief that we finally made it, as we were now able to abseil, which I found to be much safer.



Alan abseiling down the summit rocks.

As we set up the first abseil leg, I found myself relaxing for the first time that day, looking around and enjoying the view from where we were. We started to talk and joke, then it began to dawn on me that we had actually "knocked the bastard off".

We only had one 50m rope which we had to double up to abseil, so we could only descend 25m per trip. It was slow going until we finally reached the large bergschrund that marked the top of the Linda Shelf.

I was dreading the traverse back along the shelf, especially now that the sun had been on the slopes all day, softening the snow. We only needed to set off a small slab avalanche while crossing to knock us down the steep incline and over the huge drop-off below. We discussed our options.

The first was to bivouac on the bergschrund for the night, then cross the shelf when the snow had frozen once more in the early hours of the morning. Of course, it wasn't an ideal plan, given that we had no sleeping bags and the temperatures would drop well below zero. Alan had been forced to sleep in the bergshrunnd many years before and went even paler at the thought of repeating the experience.

The second was to retrace our footsteps from the morning back across the steep, high line that we'd traversed on our ascent, hoping not to trigger any falling slabs. This would allow us to reuse some of our steps, however the risk of getting swept off our feet by a wall of snow was considerable.

The third option was to traverse down lower, in an area that wasn't as steep, making a new set of tracks. This would be on slightly easier ground, but even closer to the potentially fatal drop-off if a fall were to occur.

Like students mulling over a multiple choice test, we sighed and settled for the middle solution, hoping like hell that we could safely retrace our steps. As we set off, I was surprised to find the ice was still hard even after the day's sun, but the ground was so steep we had to literally put our faces into the slope and descend on the front points of our crampons using our ice axes. It was tiring work and my feet were starting to get very sore from repeatedly kicking into the hardened surface.

As we made our way across and lower, I periodically looked back to where we had come from and how far we had yet to go. I could see we were making progress, but it was very slow and Alan was even slower. Roped together, every few steps I would stop and wait for him to catch up.

During one of these pauses, I tensed listening, certain that I could hear water running. I scanned the lower slopes, panic fluttering in my chest. In the fading light, I couldn't see running water anywhere, but I could definitely hear it. We continued down and the sound got louder and louder, then, *BANG!* A large piece of ice bounced off my helmet, followed by a rush as three more pieces hit my head and shoulders. I looked up and immediately saw the culprit. It wasn't running water but a stream of ice raining down from the mini gun barrels above the Linda Shelf. The deadly ice cliffs were beginning to release their load.

"Better hurry up here, Grant!" shouted Alan. "Something big feels like it's about to unload!"

Terrified, I rushed as quickly as I could, but our progress still seemed painfully slow. As I got further into the stream of ice, it showered upon me continuously, preventing me from looking up. I wanted to move faster but Alan was struggling, the rope tightening every few moments. It was like one of those nightmares where you know you need to run, but your feet can't move.

When we finally made it through, I breathed a huge sigh of relief. "I think that's about all the danger I can handle in one day," I said as we rested just above the crevasse, marking our exit from the Linda Shelf.

"We still have to get across that," replied Alan, nodding at the avalanche tracks below the main Gun Barrels. "Do you know how many people have been killed in that spot, Grant?"

"No idea," I said, trying not to think about it.

"Nineteen," he answered, matter-of-factly.

I groaned. "Will this day not end? When will this mountain let us free?"

I had my third swig of water, followed by another jet plane sweet. It was all I had eaten in almost 17 hours, but I felt no hunger. Fear is a pretty effective diet.



An exhausted and sick Alan crossing fresh avalanche debris on the Gun Barrels during the descent from Aoraki/Mt Cook.

The sun was setting as we headed towards the Gun Barrels. I led, trying to get across the avalanche tracks as fast as possible. Fortunately, this went quickly and we were soon safely over and making our descent back down the Linda Glacier. From here, it was

a long trudge back to Plateau Hut, with the last remaining challenge avoiding the perilous crevasses.

As mountaineers we practise falling into crevasses and rescuing ourselves, and in one climbing course, I actually dropped down to the bottom of one and had to pull myself out by climbing a rope tied to my partner. The thing I remembered most from that experience was how utterly shattered I was by the time I finally popped back into the sunshine. It was extremely hard work. So if there was ever a time I did not have the energy to fall into a crevasse, it was right now, after 17 hours of continual exertion. We did have our tracks from the morning however, so I was fairly confident we'd get back safely if we followed them.

Meanwhile, Alan appeared to have aged 20 years in one day. His shoulders were hunched and his ice axes hung at his sides, his arms lacking the energy to lift them as he walked. His feet dragged in the snow and as we got further down he started to stagger and wander like a drunkard.

After what seemed like eternity, we reached the Grand Plateau and sat down on the snow in the twilight. From here, we had a gentle, uphill stroll to Plateau Hut that in normal circumstances would have taken about 20 minutes. With Alan's condition degrading every second, I wondered if I would have to walk up by myself, in the hopes of finding someone to help drag him back.

Rising to our feet once more, we continued moving step by step. I had entered a special zone. I no longer cared when we arrived at Plateau Hut and felt removed from my body. Almost floating above my feet, I looked at Alan staggering in front and could not believe what a tough bastard he was, plodding forward. As long as he kept moving, I was happy to quietly follow behind.

Alan performed an amazing feat that day, making our whole trip a success. He'd earned the right to get back to the hut as slowly as he wanted, and when he stopped after each few steps, I waited too, silently willing him on. And then we were there, arriving in complete darkness after 21½ hours of continuous climbing,

Twenty-two days and 11 hours after leaving the summit of Mt Ruapehu, we finally finished Expedition Peak-to-Peak, weary but triumphant.