

Charlie Derrick's Final Crossing

Ben & Chris Derrick

The idea for a winter crossing from Mountain Creek to Mt Hotham first took shape in 1964 between a group of keen skiers from the Wangaratta Ski Club. For those that can remember, 1964 was not a great snow year and the WSC group had gathered for a week of skiing on Mt Bogong from Cleve Cole Hut in order to find some snow on the higher elevations.

One night, quite possibly in amongst singing songs and enjoying friendly camaraderie, the idea of the Straitjackets was born. The Straitjackets were a series of skiing challenges that were viewed as a stern test of endurance. Up-and-down Bogong was considered the easiest of the challenges and was named the Bronze Jacket. Next was the Silver Jacket from Mountain Creek to Falls Creek. The Golden Jacket was Mountain Creek to Hotham. The unlikely Diamond Jacket was from Bogong to Buller and if you wanted platinum studs on it you had to make it there and back in a day. The entry in the Cleve Cole logbook provides more information which was all in good fun.



Uncle Charlie, a gentle and well-loved farmer from Wangaratta gave them a bit more thought over the following summer. Charlie was a strong skier having finished second in the Australian Championships and had enjoyed skiing in Europe in the early 60's. Training for skiing was

rudimentary by contemporary standards during that time and local farmers were frequently met by Charlie running through the paddocks towing drag chains in order to build up his strength. Charlie was keen for the physical challenge but was also highly motivated to promote awareness of the emerging sport of cross-country skiing. Australia was just starting to produce Olympic standard skiers and Charlie knew that awareness of the sport would greatly increase the number of people enjoying the beautiful Australian Alps.

Charlie chose early September 1965 as the best time to attempt the crossing. The combination of longer days and firm frost-hardened snow would provide the best opportunity to safely navigate the route which was poorly defined and not marked by snow poles. Choosing a day that looked like good weather Charlie made camp at Mountain Creek on the night of September 2, which was also his father's birthday.

The forecast for the following day looked promising although the alpine forecasting was in its infancy in those years and was notoriously unreliable.

Setting off at 4am, under clear starry skies, it looked like a great day for the attempt. Clothing was not advanced in Australia at that time and a pair of knickerbockers and woollen Victorian Ski Team jumper were considered the height of responsible mountain attire. Hiking up the Staircase Spur with only the moonlight as companion, Charlie made his way past Bivouac Hut and onto the Summit of Bogong for the sunrise. *Authors note – I was later told a story of someone who was sleeping in Bivouac Hut that night and Uncle Charlie noted that the door was open. Being conscientious of the mountain huts, Charlie duly closed the door and barred it from the outside, unbeknownst to those asleep within. The only way out was to break out a window which they did as Charlie was disappearing up to the summit of Bogong.*

Charlie met some friends from Wang Ski Club who were camped at Cleve Cole for a breakfast of bacon and eggs before starting the difficult descent down to Big River. Skiing on a pair of skis that he made over a home-made steam barrel on the farm, Charlie skied off course a few times before finally getting on to the T-Spur for the main descent. The precious 30mins that he lost there may have had dire consequences later in his journey.

After crossing Big River Charlie made the big climb up Ropers Spur on to the Bogong High Plains. The clear dawn weather had given way to clouds and wind as he struck out across the vast plains navigating past Mt Nelse, Wallaces Hut and Mt Jim. The wind and fog turned into rain, that turned to sleet that turned to snow however Charlie, possessed with an iron will, kept skiing as the conditions turned into a blizzard.

Dropping down Basalt Temple, Charlie passed Dibbins Hut at the head of the Cobungra River before the final 12km climb up to Mt Hotham. This was the last shelter that Charlie could have utilised as the weather and conditions worsened around him. Charlie struck on, knowing that there was a large welcoming party waiting for him at Brockoff Hut (near Loch car park) at Mt Hotham, including his younger brother Bob. Charlie skied well into the night weary with fatigue from the weather and the physical toll of a challenging environment. Finally, he could go no further. Exhausted he took off his skis and after stumbling a few more steps Charlie lay down to rest at the top of Mary's Slide at what is now remembered as Derrick Cole. He was just a few hundred metres from Loch Car Park but the weather and the fatigue were too much to bear and this became his final resting place.

The welcoming party at Loch unaware of his location and buffeted by the blizzard around them headed back to the Wangaratta Ski Club in the sombre hope that Charlie had taken refuge at Dibbins Hut. Sadly, the search party located his body early the following day and the beautiful, but at times inhospitable, Australian Alps had claimed another life.

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