

## 2020 Crossing - Perisher to Kiandra in a day

*By Anthony Evans – 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020*

The opportunity only arises about once every 2 - 3 years but given its enormity it's probably a blessing in disguise. The ski from Perisher to Kiandra – the Crossing – is etched in Australian skiing history. Herbert Schlink and others made the first winter crossing of the Snowy Mountains in 1927 over a nearly a week. This was the first 'Kiandra to Kosciuszko' ('Kosciuszko' meaning Hotel Kosciuszko, or Sponars Chalet as it is today). They were caught in blizzards along the way, but thanks the huts they had specifically built in the summers prior they survived.

In the 1960's the idea of skiing across the Snowy Mountains, from Perisher rather than Sponars Chalet, to the historic town of Kiandra in a single day was born. The idea was to promote skiing in Australia. It probably wasn't the greatest marketing idea ever developed, but it certainly set a benchmark in terms of Australia's greatest long distance ski.

The first Crossing in a day was done by Kore Grunnsund and Otto Pinkas in 1963 in a time of 11 hours and 12 minutes. Their attempt 2 weeks earlier almost ended in disaster as they almost froze to death and had to spend the night in the open near Mt Tabletop. Other attempts are documented in Klaus Hueneke's 'Kiandra to Kosciuszko' book, but efforts such as Robbie Kilpinen's time of 8 hours and 11 minutes in 1964 and the jaw-dropping time of 6 hours and 18 minutes by Dave Hislop in 1985, which remains the 'record' today, are more than worthy of a mention.

My friend Chris Darlington (Darlo) and I have often talked about the 'record' – on one hand a meaningless time, but on the other a significant achievement in the minds of the few who are interested in the history of skiing in Australia. Along with Mick Brennan – our third partner-in-crime – we have tried on several occasions but each time soft snow or some other excuse had kept the record safe for another year.

2020 had been a pretty marginal snow year, particularly in the low-elevation northern end of Kosciuszko National Park around Kiandra. But late August brought a massive southerly burst of cold air and moisture, leaving deep snow to low elevations. The difficulty in getting the right conditions is that not only does there need to be snow at low elevations, it also needs to be frozen solid at all elevations – from 1400m to 2000m – to support narrow Cross Country race skis.

The text message comes from Darlo, who watches the weather like a hawk, nearly a week out 'I think it's on next week'. Damn, surely I'm getting too old for this. I quickly search the forecast for reasons why we can't do it.

'No, too windy'.

'No, will be fine by then. And it's going to be a full moon'. For the next 10 minutes I get a barrage of texts saying what the exact position the moon will be in on the night of 31 August. Shit – not only does he think he's a weather forecaster, he thinks he's an astronomer as well! Starting in the dark is critical, because the Crossing is best done South to North (Perisher to Kiandra) and at the low elevations around Kiandra

to snow will have gone 'rotten' (soft) by 9am. So, not only do you need to get there in a day, if you're not there by mid-morning, skiing in shin-deep, rotten snow at the end of an 81km ski is soul destroying. We know this from experience.

Sure enough, as the week progresses the 'planets aligns' and 1 September is the day. After that, it is clear that the snow will be melting rapidly. Unfortunately Mick couldn't make it – a badly sprained ankle was the end of the ski season for him. Maybe it was a good thing, as Mick believes you haven't truly done the Crossing unless you go from Perisher to Kiandra *and back!* Sounds unbelievable, but for someone who has come within sight of swimming the English Channel *and back*, he is totally serious.

Safety is a critical part of the journey – neither of us want a memorial race named after us. We compare notes on what we take – PLB, GPS, spare jacket and thermals, a 'storm shelter' (essentially a mini tent without poles), matches, firelighters, compass, paper maps and extra food. Plus, a strategy on the various exit points if something goes wrong.

We leave Jindabyne at 2:00am, with a plan to start at Perisher at 3am. The exact start is the Old Cooma Hut site, where all previous attempts have started from. The great advantage of this is that it is high on the mountain – close to the top of the Pretty Valley Chairlift. The Perisher groomer operators look at us strangely as we climb up from the carpark to Old Cooma Hut at 2:30. We set our watches at 3am and we are off. It is minus 7 and the snow is icy and fast. The first 15 minutes is crazy fast as we descend through the resort to Guthega and across the dam. Then begins the hardest climb of the day onto the Rolling Grounds. Once on the Rolling Grounds – high, rolling, featureless mountains – our pace picks up. But it's difficult skiing. It's dark, it's icy, the snow is very wind scoured and uneven, and we are on skis less than 45mm in width. We don't talk much – it's noisy on the ice and you have to concentrate – one false move and you're on your backside. Getting injured or breaking equipment at this time will have consequences. And, we have to pick the right route. We have GPS's, but an over reliance on them slows you down. But the main reason we don't talk is that there just isn't really a lot to say at 3:30 in the morning.

'Go to the right of that knoll', 'Watch this cornice' is about the limit of the conversation. At one stage I say, 'Aim for that star on the horizon'.

'It's a planet' is the reply.

'Since when have you been a bloody astronomer?' (or words to that effect)

Darlo skis quicker than me in the dark and on the fast downhills. Sometimes all I see is the reflective strip on his backpack in the distance, but we work well together. We descend into Schlink Pass. I haven't looked at my watch but we've probably been going for an hour and a half. Whilst it would be great to get the record, there's no point stressing over the time. Up to Gungartan Pass and along the Valentine River we keep making good time. Then there's the long, featureless section towards McAlister Saddle which stretches on forever in the dark. Although only a few kilometres to the west, hidden in the darkness, is the towering peak of Mt Jagungal. As we descent along the Doubtful River the dawn light appears but the light is so flat against the white snow it makes it harder than skiing in the dark. Bushes start to



From left: *Chris Darlington and Anthony Evans*

Two tired lads after skiing 81km in 6 hours and 55 minutes. This is the burnt-out Kiandra Courthouse (built in the 1880s) – the finish point of the K-K Crossing. Fortunately, it will be rebuilt over the coming years.

poke out through the snow and I mutter 'If the snow is so thin here we have no hope of crossing Happy Jacks Plain'. Darlo doesn't bother to respond. Negativity doesn't help at this point.

We pass Cesjacks Hut on full daylight and I look at my watch for the first time. Half way and it's taken 3 and a quarter hours. Fast, but probably not fast enough for the record. We make our way through to Crooks Racecourse and head down Macgregors Ck towards Happy Jacks Plain, now with the sun rising above us. We try to stay on the east side of the creek but we run out of snow and have to take our skis off and run down into the creek and across onto the western lee side where the snow has accumulated. Around the next corner the snow has accumulated too much and there's a significant cornice in front of us, even though we're nearly on Happy Jacks Plain.

"Above or below?" I yell to Darlo.

'Through the guts' he says, which turns out to be a mistake. We get to the steepest part and cannot go any further. But at this point due to the steep, icy slope we can't go back, or up or down. So, we do the stupidest thing possible at that point and take our ski off. Now we're really stuck. With Darlo's long legs he kicks steps up and over the lip of the cornice, but I'm still stuck. There's a 20 metre slide if I fall. It won't kill me, but the rocks below mean the ending won't be much fun either. Eventually I kick steps back to where Darlo had been and manage to use the steps he cut to get over the cornice lip. Meanwhile, Darlo is in stitches on the top of the cornice telling me I

look like a ballerina as I'm clinging to the steep, icy slope with my toenails. I eventually get there but my toes are sore for a week afterwards.

We cross Happy Jacks Plain and there's snow almost the whole way. Almost unbelievable, and I have to apologise for being so negative earlier. A quick break at the crossing of Happy Jacks River and we head for Arsenic Ridge. We pass the burnt out shell of Brooks Hut following the devastating bushfires last summer. But the bushfires also make the skiing up Arsenic Ridge easy and before long we are next to Tabletop Mountain. After a mistake caused by following ski tracks towards Broken Dam Hut rather than towards Kiandra we make a beeline along the ridge where the snow is holding up remarkably well. We know now that the record won't be broken but we finish as strongly as we can. I start to get some of my own back on Darlo from his earlier pace on the Rolling Grounds, as he starts to slow a bit and I lead the way through the burnt and twisted snowgums

We descent into Kiandra and are able to ski right to the old 1880's-built courthouse, which despite also being destroyed by the recent bushfires is still the 'finish' of the Crossing. Darlo's dad, Dave is waiting there for us with a beer and a pizza. It's only 10 o'clock in the morning but after a 3am start it feels like late afternoon. 6 hours and 55 minutes, and 81 km's, from Perisher to Kiandra. Dave's record seems safer than ever. It's hard not to feel a bit disappointed, despite just undertaking the most amazing cross country ski possible in Australia.